

THE EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY

by Philip Doddridge

Doddridge's examination of Christian evidences demonstrating that the apostles were capable witnesses with worthy character, had no motive to deceive, and their testimony gained remarkable early acceptance.

4 Chapters

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The Evidences Of Christianity

THE EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY BRIEFLY STATED, AND THE NEW TESTAMENT PROVED TO

BE GENUINE.² PET. i.16. -- WE HAVE NOT FOLLOWED CUNNINGLY DEvised FABLES. -- IT is undoubtedly a glory to our age and country, that the nature of moral virtue has been so clearly stated, and the practice of it so strongly enforced, by the views of its native beauty and beneficial consequences, both to private persons and societies. Perhaps, in this respect, hardly any nation or time has equalled, certainly few, if any, have exceeded, our own. Yet I fear I might add, there have been few ages or countries, where vice has more generally triumphed, in its most audacious and, in other respects, most odious forms. This may well appear a surprising case; and it will surely be worth our while to inquire into the causes of so strange a circumstance. I cannot now enter into a particular detail of them. But I am persuaded, none is more considerable than that unhappy disregard, either to the Gospel in general, or to its most peculiar and essential truths, which is so visible amongst us, and which appears to be continually growing. It is plain, that, like some of old, who thought and professed themselves the wisest of mankind, or, in other words, the freest thinkers of their age, multitudes among us have not liked to retain God and his truths in their knowledge: and it is therefore the less to be wondered at, if God has given them up to a reprobate mind [1] ; to the most infamous lusts and enormities; and to a depth of a degeneracy, which, while it is in part the natural consequence, is in part also the just, but dreadful, punishment of their apostasy from the faith. And I am persuaded, that those who do indeed wish well to the cause of public virtue, as every true Christian most certainly does, cannot serve it more effectually, than by endeavouring to establish men in the belief of the Gospel in general, and to affect their hearts with its most distinguishing truths. The latter of these is our frequent employment, and is what I have, particularly been attempting in the preceding discourses on the power and grace of the Redeemer: the former I shall now, by the divine assistance, apply myself to, in those that follow. And I have chosen the words now before us, as a proper introduction to such a design. They do indeed peculiarly refer to the coming of our Lord, which the apostle represents as attested by that glory, of which he was an eye-witness on the mount of transfiguration, and by that voice from heaven which he heard there: but the truth of these facts is evidently connected with that of the Gospel in general. I am persuaded, therefore, you will think they are properly prefixed to a discourse on the general evidences of Christianity. And I hope, by the divine assistance, to propose them at this time in such a manner, as shall convince you, that the apostles had reason to say, and that we also have reason to repeat it, we have not followed cunningly devised fables [2] . I have often touched on this subject occasionally, but I think it my duty at present to insist something more largely upon it. You easily apprehend, that it is a matter of the highest importance, being indeed no other than the great foundation of all our eternal hopes. While so many are daily attempting to destroy this foundation, it is possible, that those of you, especially, who are but entering on the world, may be called out to give a reason of the hope that is in you [3] . I would therefore, with the apostle, be concerned, that you may be ready to do it. It may fortify you against the artifices, by which the unwary are often deceived and ensnared, and may possibly enable you to put to silence

their foolishness [4] . At least it will be for the satisfaction of your own minds, to have considered the matter seriously, and to be conscious to yourselves, that you are not Christians merely by education, or example, as (had you been born elsewhere) you might have been Pagans or Mahometans; but that you are so upon rational evidence, and because (as the sacred historian expresses it) you know the certainty of those things in which you have been instructed [5] . To open and vindicate the proof of Christianity in all its extent would be the employment of many discourses; nor would it, on the whole, be proper to attempt it here. All that I now intend here is, to give you a summary view of the most considerable arguments, in that which seems to me their most proper and natural connexion; that so you may be able to judge of them better than you could possibly do by a few scattered remarks, or by the most copious enlargement on any single branch of them alone. I shall endeavour to dispose these hints so, as that they may be some guide to those, whose leisure and abilities may lead them to a more ample and curious inquiry; that they may not be entangled in so complex an argument, but may proceed in an orderly manner. And if any of you, my friends, desire a more particular information on any of those heads, which I now but briefly suggest, you may depend upon it, that faithful ministers of every denomination will think it an important part of their duty, to give you all the private assistance they can. It is my hearty prayer, that God would enable me to plead his cause with success; that he would open your understandings to receive these things, and strengthen your memories to retain them; that you may not be like children; tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and the cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive [6] ; but may be strong in faith, giving glory to God [7] ; that, your faith being more and more established, it may appear, that the tree is watered at the roots; and all your other graces may grow and flourish in an equal proportion. But, before I proceed, I must desire you to observe, that there is no proof in the world so satisfactory to the true Christian, as to have felt the transforming power of the Gospel on his own soul. As that illiterate man whose eyes were miraculously opened by Christ, when he was questioned by the Jewish Sanhedrin, who endeavoured with all their sophistry to prove Christ an impostor, answered with great steadiness and constancy, and with a great deal of reason too, this one thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see [8] : so the most unlearned of the disciples of Jesus, having found his soul enlightened and sanctified, and felt his heart so effectually wrought upon, as to bring him home to his duty, his God, and his happiness, by the constraining power of the Gospel, will despise a thousand subtle objections which may be urged against it: and, though the cross of Christ be to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness, yet with this experience of its saving energy, he will honour it in the midst of all their contempt and ridicule, as the power of God and the wisdom of God [9] . In this sense, though the miraculous communication of the Spirit be ceased, he that believes hath still the witness in himself [10] ; and while the Spirit beareth witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God [11] , he cannot doubt, but that the word, by which he was, as it were, begotten unto him, is indeed a divine and incorruptible seed [12] . And, perhaps, there are certain seasons of pressing temptation, in which the most learned as well as the most illiterate Christian will find this the surest anchor of his hope. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged, that this glorious kind of evidence is like the white stone, mentioned in the Revelation, in which there was a new name written, which no man knew, but he who received it [13] . God has therefore made other provision for the honour and support of his Gospel, by furnishing it with a variety of proof, which may, with undiminished, and indeed with growing, conviction, be communicated from one to another. And we should be greatly wanting in gratitude

to him, in zeal for a Redeemer's kingdom, and in charitable concern for the conversion of those who reject the Gospel, as well as for the edification of those who embrace it, should we wholly overlook these arguments, or neglect to acquaint ourselves with them. This is the evidence, which I am now to propose; and I desire you would hear it with a becoming attention. I speak to you, as to rational creatures: judge ye of the reasonableness of what I shall say. In the prosecution of this great design, I shall endeavour more particularly to shew you, -- that, if we take the matter on a general survey, it will appear highly probable, that such a scheme of doctrines and precepts, as we find Christianity to be, should indeed have been a divine revelation; -- and then, that, if we examine into the external evidence of it, we shall find it certain, in fact, that it was so, and that it had its original from above. First, Let me shew, "that, taking the matter merely in theory, it will appear highly probable, that such a system as the Gospel should be indeed a divine revelation." To evidence this, I would more particularly prove, -- that the state of mankind was such, as greatly to need a revelation; -- that there seems from the light of nature, encouragement to hope that God should grant one; -- that it is reasonable to believe, if any were made, it should be so introduced and transmitted, as we are told Christianity was; and that its general nature and substance should be such, as we find that of the Gospel is. If these particulars are made out, here will be a strong presumptive evidence, that the Gospel is from God; and we shall have opened a fair way toward that more direct proof, which I principally intend.¹ "The case of mankind is naturally such, as greatly to need a divine revelation." I speak not here of man in his original state; though even then, as many have largely shewn, some instruction from above seemed necessary to inform him of many particulars, which it was highly expedient that he should immediately know: but I speak of him in the degenerate condition in which he now so evidently lies, by whatever means he was brought into it. It is an easy thing to make florid encomiums on the perfection of natural light, and to deceive unwary readers with an ambiguous term [14] (which shall sometimes signify all that appears even to the divine understanding, and sometimes no more than the meanest of the human race may, or than they. actually do, attain); but let fact speak, and the controversy will soon be determined. I appeal to all, that are acquainted with the records of antiquity, or that have any knowledge of the most credible accounts of the present state of those countries where Christianity is unknown, whether it is not too obvious a truth, that the whole heathen world has lain, and still lies, in wickedness [15] . Have not incomparably the greater part of them been perpetually bewildered in their religious notions and practices, vastly differing from each, and almost equally differing on all sides from the probable appearances of truth and reason? Is any thing so wild as not to have been believed, any thing so infamous as not to have been practised by them, while they have not only pretended to justify it by reason, but have consecrated it as a part of their religion? To this very day, what are the discoveries of new nations in the American or African world, but, generally speaking, the opening of new scenes of enormity? Rapine, lust, cruelty, human sacrifices, and the most stupid idolatries, are, and, for ought I can find, always have been, the morality and religion of almost all the Pagan nations under heaven: and to say, that there have still been some smothered sparks of reason within, which, if cherished, might have led them to truth and happiness, is only saying, that they have been so much the more criminal, and therefore so much the more miserable. But you live at home, and hear these things only by uncertain report. Look then around you within the sphere of your own observation, and see the temper; and character of the generality of those, who have been educated in a Christian, and even in a Protestant, country. Observe their ignorance and forgetfulness of the Divine Being, their impieties,

their debaucheries, their fraud, their oppression, their pride, their avarice, their ambition; their unnatural insensibility of the wants, and sorrows, and interests, of each other; and, when you see how bad they generally are in the midst of so many advantages, judge by that of the probable fate of those that want them. Judge, upon these views, whether a revelation be an unnecessary thing.² "There is, from the light of nature, considerable encouragement to hope, that God would favour his creatures with so needful a blessing as a revelation appears." That a revelation is in itself a possible thing, is evident beyond all shadow of a doubt. Shall not he that made man's mouth [16] , who has given us this wonderful faculty of discovering our sentiments and communicating our ideas to each other, shall not he be able to converse with his rational creatures, and by sensible manifestations, or by inward impressions, to convey the knowledge of things, which lie beyond, the ken of their natural faculties, and yet may be highly conducive to their advantage? To own a God, and to deny him such a power, will be a notorious contradiction. -- But it may appear much more dubious, whether he will please to confer such a favour on sinful creatures. Now I acknowledge, that we could not certainly conclude he would ever do it; considering, on the one hand, how justly they stood exposed to his final displeasure; and, on the other, what provision he had made by the frame of the human mind, and of nature around us, for giving us such notices of himself, as would leave us inexcusable, if we either failed to know him, or to glorify him as God, as the apostle argues at large [17] . Nevertheless methinks we should have had something of this kind to hope, from considering God as the indulgent Father of his creatures; from observing the tender care which he takes of us, and the liberal supply which he grants for the support of the animal life, especially, from the provision which he has made for man, considered as a guilty and calamitous creature, by the medicinal and healing virtue which he has given to many of the productions of nature, which, in a state of perfect rectitude and happiness, man would never have needed. This is a circumstance, which seemed strongly to intimate, that he would some time or another graciously provide some remedy to heal men's minds; and that he would interpose to instruct them, in his own nature, in the manner in which he is to be served, and in the final treatment which they may expect from him. And I think such an apprehension seems very congruous to the sentiments of the generality of mankind; as appears from the many pretences to divine revelation which have often been made, and the readiness of multitudes to receive them on very slender proofs. This shews how naturally men expect some such kind interposition of the Deity: a thought which might farther be confirmed by some remarkable passages of heathen writers, which I have not now time particularly to mention.³ We may easily conclude, "that, if a revelation were given, it would be introduced and transmitted in such a manner, as Christianity is said to have been." It is exceeding probable, for instance, that it should be taught, either by some illustrious person sent down from a superior world, or at least by a man of eminent wisdom and piety, who should himself have been, not only a teacher, but an example, of universal goodness. In order to this it seems probable, that he would be led through a series of calamity and distresses; since otherwise he would not have been a pattern of the virtues, which adorn adversity, and are peculiar to it. And it might also have been expected, that in the extremity of his distresses, the blessed God, whose messenger he was, should, in some extraordinary manner, have interposed, either to preserve or to recover him from death. It is moreover exceedingly probable that such a person, and perhaps also they who were at first employed as his messengers to the world, should be endowed with a power of working miracles; both to awaken men's attention, and to prove a divine mission, and the consequent truth of their doctrines; some of which might, perhaps, not be

capable of any other kind of proof; or, if they were, it is certain that no method of arguing is so short, so plain, and so forcible, and, on the whole, so well suited to the conviction, and probably the reformation, of mankind, as a course of evident, repeated, and uncontrolled miracles. And such a method of proof is especially adapted to the populace, who are incomparably the greater part of mankind, and for whole benefit, we may assure ourselves, a revelation would chiefly be designed. -- I might add, it was no way improbable, though not in itself certain, that a dispensation should open gradually on the world; and that the most illustrious messenger of God to men should be ushered in by some predictions, which should raise a great expectation of his appearance, and have an evident accomplishment in him. As for the propagation of a religion so introduced, it seems no way improbable, that, having been thus established in its first age, it should be transmitted to future generations by credible testimony, as other important facts are. It is certain, that affairs of the utmost moment, which are transacted amongst men, depend on testimony; on this, voyages are undertaken, settlements made, and controversies decided; controversies, on which not only the estates, but the lives, of men depend. And though it must be owned, that such an historical evidence is not equally convincing with miracles which are wrought before our own eyes; yet it is certain, it may rise to such a degree as to exclude all reasonable doubt. And I know not why we should expect, that the evidence of a revelation should be such, as universally to compel the immediate assistance of all to whom it is offered. To me it seems much more likely, that it should be so adjusted, as to be a kind of touchstone to the tempers and characters of men; capable indeed of giving ample satisfaction to the diligent and candid inquirer, yet attended with some circumstances, whence the captious and perverse might take occasion to cavil and object. Such might we suppose the evidence of the revelation would be, and such it is maintained that of Christianity is. The teachers of it say, and undertake to prove, that it was thus introduced, thus established, and thus transmitted; and we trust, that this is a strong presumption in its favour: especially as we can add,⁴ "That the main doctrines contained in the Gospel are of such a nature, as we might in general suppose those of a divine revelation would be, rational, practical, and sublime." One would imagine, that, in a revelation of a religion from God, the great principles of natural religion should be clearly asserted and strongly maintained: such I mean, as the existence [18] , the unity [19] , the perfection [20] , and the providence, of God [21] ; the essential and immutable difference between moral good and evil [22] ; the obligation we are under to the various branches of virtue, whether human, social, or divine [23] ; the value and immortality of the soul [24] ; and the rewards and punishments of a future state [25] . One would easily conclude, that all these particulars must be contained in it; and that, upon the whole, it should appear calculated to form men's minds to a proper temper, rather than to amuse them with curious speculations. It might indeed be farther supposed, and probably concluded, that such a revelation would contain some things, which could not have been learnt from the highest improvements of natural light: and, considering the infinite and unfathomable nature of the blessed God, it would be more than probable, that many things might be hinted at, and referred to, which our feeble faculties should not be able fully to comprehend. Yet we should expect, to find these introduced in a practical view, as directing us to duties before unknown, or suggesting powerful motives to make us resolute and constant in the discharge of the rest [26] . As for ceremonial and positive institutions, we should imagine, at least in the most perfect state of the revelation, that they should be but few, and those few plainly subservient to the great purposes of practical religion. I shall only add, that, forasmuch as pride appears to be the most reigning corruption of the human mind, and the source of

numberless irregularities, it is exceeding probable, that a divine revelation should be calculated to humble the fallen creature, and bring it to a sense of its guilt and weakness; and the more evidently that tendency appears, other things being equal, the greater reason there is to believe, that the original of such a scheme is from above. Your own thoughts have undoubtedly prevented me in the application of these characters to the Christian revelation. The justice of that application I must not now illustrate at large. But I must beg leave to advance one remark, which will conclude what I have to say on this general head: which is, that, as the Christian system is undoubtedly worthy of God, so, considering the manner in which it is said to have been introduced, (separate from the evidence of the facts, which is afterwards to be considered,) it is extremely difficult to imagine, from whom else it could have proceeded. I will readily allow, that neither the reasonableness of its doctrines, nor the purity of its morals, will alone prove its divine original; since it is possible, the reason of one man may discover that which the reason of another approves, as being, in itself considered, either true in theory or useful in practice. But this is not all; for, in the present case, it is evident, that the first teachers of Christianity professed that they were taught it by divine revelation, and that they were empowered by God with miraculous endowments for the confirmation of it. Now, if it were not indeed so as they professed, how can we account for so strange a phenomenon, as such a doctrine introduced with such pretences? If it were not from God, whence was it? From good or from evil angels, or men? Wicked creatures, as our Lord strongly intimates [27], would never contrive and propagate so excellent a scheme; nor can we imagine, that holy angels or righteous men would thus be found false witnesses of God [28], or have attempted to support the cause of religion and truth by such impious and notorious falsehoods, as their pretensions must have been, if they were falsehoods at all. And thus much for the first branch of the argument: if you consider the Christian scheme only in theory, it appears highly probable; since a revelation was so much needed, might so reasonably be expected, and, if it were ever given, would, so far as we can judge, be thus introduced, and be in the main attended with such internal characters. And though we have not as yet expressly proved, that the Gospel was introduced in such a manner as the defenders of it assert; yet it would be strangely unaccountable, that so admirable a system of truth and duty should be advanced by the prince of darkness and the children of wickedness; as it must have been, if the persons first employed in the propagation of it were not endowed with power from on high [29]. To embrace the Gospel is so safe and, on the whole, so comfortable a thing, that I think a wise man would deliberately and resolutely venture his all upon it, though nothing more could be offered for its confirmation. But, blessed be God, we have a great deal more to offer in this important cause; and can add, with still greater confidence, that is not only in theory thus probable, but, Secondly, "that it is in fact certain, that Christianity is indeed a divine revelation." Here I confer the chief stress is to be laid; and therefore I shall insist more largely on this branch of the argument, and endeavour, by the divine assistance, to prove the certainty of this great fact. You will naturally apprehend, that I speak only of what is commonly called a moral certainty [30]: but I need speak of no more; for, in many cases, such kind of evidence gives the mind as ample and as rational a satisfaction, as it may find even in some supposed mathematical demonstration; since there it is possible, at least in a long deduction of particulars, for the most sagacious of mankind to fall into a mistake. Now, in order to settle this grand point as clearly as I can, I think it may be proper to prove, I. That the books of the New Testament, as they are now in your hands, may be depended upon as written by the first preachers and publishers of Christianity. And, II. That hence it will certainly follow, that what they

assert is true, and that the religion they teach brings along with it such evidences of a divine authority, as may most justly recommend it to our acceptance. Each of these heads might furnish out matter for many volumes; but it is my business to hint at the most obvious and important thoughts, by which they may briefly be illustrated and confirmed. I. I am to prove to you, "that the books of the New Testament, now in your hands, were written by the first preachers and publishers of Christianity." You see I confine the present proof to the books of the New Testament. Not that I think the authority of the Old to be suspected, or the use of it by any means to be despised. God forbid! it is an invaluable treasure, which demands our daily delightful and thankful perusal, and is capable of being defended in a manner, which, I am persuaded, its subtlest enemies will never be able to answer. But the nature of my present argument, and the limits of my time, oblige me at present to wave the proof it, any farther than as it is implied in, and dependent upon, what I have more immediately in view. In the process of the discourse, though I shall studiously avoid any ostentation of learning, yet it will be absolutely necessary to assert some things, which cannot certainly be known, without some little acquaintance with ancient writers. You cannot, most of you, be supposed to have formed such an acquaintance; but I take it for granted you will readily believe, that I will not lie for God, nor talk deceitfully for him [31] . I shall say nothing of this kind, but what I know to be contained in those writings; and you may assure yourselves, that no man of common sense, whatever his moral or religious character were, would venture, in such an age as this, publicly to cite passages as from authors in every one's hands, which he cannot prove to be contained in them. Having premised these things, I go on to the argument, and shall advance in it by the following degrees. I shall prove, -- that Christianity is an ancient religion; -- that there was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, crucified at Jerusalem above seventeen hundred years ago; -- that the first preachers of his religion wrote books, which went by the name of those, that now make up the volume of our New Testament; -- that they are preserved in the original to the present times; -- and that the translation of them, which you have, is in the main such, as may be depended upon, as faithful. And then I shall have clearly made out what I proposed in this first part. I. It is certain, "that Christianity is not a new religion, but that it was maintained by great multitudes, quickly after the time in which Jesus is said to have appeared." That there was, considerably more than sixteen hundred years ago, a body of men, who went by the name of Christians, is almost as evident, as that a race of men was then existing in the world; nor do I know, that any have ever been wild and confident enough to dispute it. If any should for argument-sake question it, they might quickly be convinced by a considerable number of Christian writers, who lived in the same or the next age [32] , and mention it as a thing notoriously certain, that Christianity was then of some standing in the world; some of them giving directions and exhortations to their brethren, and others forming apologies to their enemies, for which there could not other wise have been the least foundation. We might have acquiesced in their testimony, had it been alone; but it is confirmed by that of Jews and heathens, who, by their early invectives against the Christians, do most evidently prove, that there was such a body of men in the world. -- The most considerable Roman historians, who lived in this age, and wrote of it, are Tacitus and Suetonius, who both published their writings above sixteen hundred years ago, and they are always and very justly appealed to, as pregnant witnesses upon this occasion. -- For, Tacitus assures us, "that, in Nero's days," who began his reign about twenty years after the death of Christ, "there was a vast multitude of Christians, not only in Judæa, but at Rome took against whom Nero raised a persecution, attended with such circumstances of ignominy and cruelty, as

moved the compassion even of their enemies;" of which number this historian evidently was [33] . Nay he plainly intimates, that this was not the first attempt which had been made to crush them; though this attempt was so early as we have heard. -- His contemporary Suetonius, in his more concise manner, attests the same [34] . -- And Pliny, the intimate friend and correspondent of both, being employed in Trajan's time to persecute the Christians, writes an account of them to that emperor, which, though commonly known, must be mentioned as it is so highly important. After having spoken very favourably of their moral character, he adds, "that many of both sexes, and of every age and rank, were infected with this superstition," as he thinks fit to express it; "that it was gone into the villages, as well as the cities; and that, till he began to put the laws in execution against them, the temples of the heathen deities were almost deserted, and hardly any could be found who would buy victims for them [35] ." -- It might be added, that Marcus Antoninus [36] , who wrote a few years after Pliny, mentions the Christians "as examples of a resolute and obstinate contempt of death:" and it is generally supposed, they are the Galileans, whom Epictetus speaks of [37] , "as those whom practice had taught to despise the rage of their armed enemies [38] ." I shall dismiss this head with observing, that it tends greatly to the confirmation of Christianity, that each of these celebrated and ancient pagan writers, at the same time they attest the existence of such a body of men professing it, inform us of those extreme persecutions which they underwent in the very infancy of their religion; a fact also farther apparent from the apologies addressed by the Christians to their persecutors, which, whatever imperfections may attend the manner in which some of them are written, appear to me some of the most valuable remains of antiquity, (the sacred records only excepted,) especially those of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Minutius Fælix. -- This fundamental point is then abundantly made out; that there were vast numbers of men, very quickly after the time when Jesus is said to have appeared upon earth, who professed his religion, and chose to endure the greatest extremities rather than they would abandon it. Hence it will be easy to shew, 2. "That there was certainly such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified at Jerusalem, when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor there." It can never be imagined, that multitudes of people should take their name from Christ, and sacrifice their lives for their adherence to him, even in the same age in which he is said to have lived, if they had not been well assured there was such a person. Now several of the authors I have mentioned plainly assert, that the Christians were denominated from Christ: nay, Tacitus expressly adds, "that he was put to death under Pontius Pilate, who was procurator of Judæa, in the reign of Tiberius [39] ." And it is well known, that the primitive Christian apologists often appeal to the acts of Pilate [40] , or the memoirs of his government, (which he, according to the custom of other procurators, transmitted to Rome,) as containing an account of these transactions; and, as the appeal was made to those who had the command of the public records, we may assure ourselves such testimonies were then extant. But it is a fact which our enemies never denied; they owned it, they even gloried in it, and upbraided the Christians with it. The Jews, therefore, in some of their earliest writings since those times, call Jesus by the ignominious name of "the man who was hanged or crucified," and his followers, "the servants of the crucified person [41] ." And Lucian rallies them for deserting the pompous train of the heathen deities, to worship one whom he impiously calls "a crucified impostor [42] ." -- [Spartian also assures us, that the emperor Alexander Severus entertained such high thoughts of Christ, "that he would have admitted him into the number of his deities, and have built a temple to him, had not his pagan subjects vigorously opposed it [43] ." And Porphyry, though an inveterate enemy to Christianity, not only allowed there was such a person, but honoured him "as

a most wise and pious man, approved by the gods, and taken up into heaven for his distinguished virtues [44] ." -- I might add a great deal more on this head [45] ; but it already appears as certain as ancient history can make it, and incomparably more certain than most of the facts which it has transmitted to us, that there was at the time commonly supposed such a person as Christ, who professed himself a divine teacher, and who gathered many disciples, by whom his religion was afterwards published in the world.³ It is also certain, "that the first publishers of this religion wrote books, which contained an account of the life and doctrine of Jesus their Master, and which went by the name of those that now make up our New Testament."It was in the nature of things exceeding probable, that what they had seen and heard, they would declare and publish to the world in writing [46] ; considering how common books were in the age and countries in which they taught; and of how great importance an acquaintance with the history and doctrine of Christ was, to the purposes which they so strenuously pursued: but we have much more than such a presumptive evidence.The greatest adversaries of Christianity must grant, that we have books of great antiquity, written some fourteen, others fifteen, and some sixteen, hundred years ago [47] ; in which mention is made of the life of Christ, as written by many, and especially by four of his disciples, who by way of eminence are called the Evangelists. Great pains indeed have been taken to prove, that some spurious pieces were published under the names of the apostles, containing the history of these things: but surely this must imply, that it was a thing known and allowed, that the apostles did write some narrations of this kind; as counterfeit coin implies some true money, which it is designed to represent. And I am sure, he must be very little acquainted with the ancient ecclesiastical writers, who does not know, that the primitive Christians made a very great difference between those writings, which we call the canonical books of the New Testament, and others; which plainly shews, that they did not judge of writings merely by the names of their pretended authors, but inquired with an accuracy becoming the importance of those pretences. The result of this inquiry was, that the four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen Epistles of Paul, one of Peter, and one of John, were received upon such evidence, that Eusebius, a most accurate and early critic in these things, could not learn that they had ever been disputed [48] : and afterwards the remaining books of the New Testament, Hebrews, James, the Second of Peter, the Second and Third of John, Jude, and the Revelation, were admitted as genuine, and added to the rest; though some circumstances attending them rendered their authority for a while a little dubious. On the whole, it is plain, the primitive Christians were so satisfied in the authority of these sacred books, that they speak of them, not only as credible and authentic, but as equal to the oracles of the Old Testament, as divinely inspired as the words of the Spirit, as the law and organ of God, and as the rule of faith, which cannot be contradicted without great guilt; with many other expressions of the like kind, which often occur in their discourses. To which I may add, that, in some of their councils, the New Testament was placed on a throne, to signify their concern, that all their controversies and actions might be determined and regulated by it. On the whole, then, you see, that the primitive church did receive certain pieces, which bore the same titles with the books of our New Testament. Now I think it is evident, they were as capable of judging whether a book was written by Matthew, John, or Paul, as an ancient Roman could be of determining whether Horace, Tully, or Livy, wrote those which go under their names. And I am sure, the interest of the former was so much more concerned in the writings of the apostles, than that of the latter in the compositions of the poets, orators, or even their historians, that there is reason to believe, they would take much greater care to inform themselves fully in the merits of the cause, and to avoid

being imposed upon by artifice and fiction. Let me now shew,⁴ "That the books of the New Testament have been preserved in the main uncorrupted, to the present time, in the original language in which they were written." This is a matter of vast importance, and, blessed be God, it is attended with proportionable evidence; an evidence, in which the hand of Providence has indeed been remarkably seen; for I am confident, that there is no other ancient book in the world, which may so certainly and so easily be proved to be authentic. And, here, I will not argue merely from the piety of the primitive Christians, and the heroic resolution with which they chose to endure the greatest extremities, rather than they would deliver up their Bibles, (though that be a consideration of some evident weight;) but shall entreat you to consider the utter impossibility of corrupting them. From the first ages they were received and read in the churches, as a part of their public worship, just as Moses and the Prophets were in the Jewish synagogues; they were presently spread far and wide, as the boundaries of the church were increased; they were early translated into other languages, of which translations some remain to this day. Now, when this was the case, how could they possibly be adulterated? Is it a thing to be supposed or imagined, that thousands and millions of people should come together from distant countries; and that, with all their diversities of language, and customs, and, I may add, of sentiments too, they should have agreed on corrupting a book, which they all acknowledged to be the rule of their faith, and their manners, and the great charter by which they held their eternal hopes. It were madness to believe it: especially, when we consider what numbers of heretics appeared in the very infancy of the church, who all pretended to build their notions on Scripture, and most of them appealed to it as the final judge of controversies: now, it is certain, that these differing parties of professing Christians were a perpetual guard upon each other, and rendered it impossible for one party to practise grossly on the sacred books, without the discovery and the clamour of the rest. Nor must I omit to remind you, that in every age, from the apostles time to our own, there have been numberless quotations made from the books of the New Testament; and a multitude of commentaries in various languages, and some of very ancient date, have been written upon them: so that, if the books themselves were lost, I believe they might, in a great measure, if not entirely, be recovered from the writings of others. And one might venture to say, the quotations, which have ever been made from all the ancient writings now remaining in Europe, were to be massed together, the bulk of them would be by no means comparable to that of the quotations taken from the New Testament alone. So that a man might, with a much better face, dispute, whether the writings ascribed to Homer, Demosthenes, Virgil, or Cæsar, be, in the main, such as they left them, than he could question it concerning those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James, and Paul, whether they are in the main so. I say, in the main, because we readily allow, that the hand of a printer, or of a transcriber, might chance, in some places, to insert one letter or word for another, and the various readings of this, as well as of all other ancient books, prove, that this has sometimes been the case. Nevertheless, those various readings are generally of so little importance, that he, who can urge them as an objection against the assertion we are now maintaining, must have little judgement or little integrity; and indeed after those excellent things which have been laid on the subject by many defenders of Christianity, if he have read their writings, he must have little modesty too. Since then it appears, that the books of the New Testament, as they now stand in the original, are, without any material alteration, such as they were, when they came from the hands of the persons whose names they bear, nothing remains to complete this part of the argument, but to shew,⁵ "That the translation of them, now in your hands, may be depended upon, as in all things most

material, agreeable to the original."This is a fact of which the generality of you are not capable of judging immediately. yet it is a matter of great importance: it is, therefore, a very great pleasure to me to think, what ample evidence you may find another way, to make your minds as easy on this head as you could reasonably wish them: I mean, by the concurrent testimony of others, in circumstances in which you cannot imagine they would unite to deceive you. There are, to be sure, very few of us, whose office it is publicly to preach the Gospel, who have not examined this matter with care, and who are not capable of judging in so easy a case. I believe you have seen few in the place where I now stand, that could not have told you, as I now solemnly do, that, on a diligent comparison of our translation with the original, we find that of the New Testament, (and, I might also add, that of the Old,) in the main, faithful and judicious. You know, indeed, that we do not scruple on some occasions to animadvert upon it; but you also know, that these remarks affect not the fundamentals of religion, and seldom reach any farther than the beauty of a figure, or, at most, the connexion of an argument. Nay, I can confidently say, that, to the best, of my knowledge and remembrance, as there is no copy of the Greek, so neither is there any translation of the New Testament, which I have seen, whether ancient or modern, how defective and faulty soever, from which all the principal facts and doctrines of Christianity might not be learnt, so far as the knowledge of them is necessary to salvation, or even to some considerable degrees of edification in piety. Nor do I except from this remark, even that most erroneous and corrupt version, published by the English Jesuits at Rheims, which is, undoubtedly, one of the worst that ever appeared in our language. But I desire not, that, with respect to our own translation of the New Testament, a matter of so great moment as the fidelity of it should rest on my testimony alone, or, entirely, on that of any of my brethren, for whose integrity and learning you may have the greatest and justest esteem. I rejoice to say, that this is a head, on which we cannot possibly deceive you, if we were ever so desirous to do it. And, indeed, in this respect, that is our advantage, which, in others, is our great calamity, I mean the diversity of our religious opinions. It is certain, that, wheresoever there is a body of dissenters from the public establishment, who do yet agree with their brethren of that establishment in the use of the same translation, though they are capable of examining it, and judging of it; there is as great evidence as could reasonably be desired, that such a translation is, in the main, right; for, if it were in any considerable argument corrupted, most of the other debates would quickly lose themselves in this: and, though such dissenters had all that candor, tenderness, and respect for their fellow Christians, which, I hope, we shall always endeavour to maintain, yet they would, no doubt, think themselves obliged in conscience to bear a warm and loud testimony against so crying an abomination, as they would another day appear free from the guilt of a confederacy to poison the public fountains, and destroy the souls of men. But we make no complaint on this subject; we all unite in bearing our testimony to the oracles of God, as delivered in our own language. Oh that we were equally united in regulating our doctrines and our discipline, our worship and our practice, by them! You see then, on the whole, how much reason there is to believe, "that the books of the New Testament, as they are now in your hands, were written by those whole names they bear, even the first preachers and publishers of Christianity." This is the grand point; and hence it will follow, by a train of easy and natural consequences, that the Gospel is most certainly true: but that is a topic of argument abundantly sufficient to furnish out matter for another discourse. May God command this blessing on what has already been laid before us, that, through the operation of his Spirit, it may be useful for establishing our regard to the Scripture, and for confirming our faith in that Almighty Redeemer,

who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last [49] ; whom to know is life everlasting [50] , and in whom to believe is the great security of our eternal salvation! Amen.

THE EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY, DEDUCED FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT, ALLOWED TO BE

GENUINE.² PET. i.16. -- WE HAVE NOT FOLLOWED CUNNINGLY DEvised FABLES. -- WHEN we are addressing ourselves to an audience of professing Christians, I think, we may reasonably take it for granted, in the main course of our ministry, that they believe the truth of the Gospel, and may argue with them on that supposition. To be ever laying the foundation, would be the part of an unwise builder, and be greatly detrimental to your edification and comfort, and, I may add, to our own. Nevertheless, Christians, we do not desire, that you should take it merely upon our word, that your religion is divine, and your Scriptures inspired. We desire, that your faith, as well as your worship, should be a reasonable service [51] ; and wish, that, in this respect, all the Lord's people were as prophets [52] ; that as every Christian is, in his sphere, set for the defence of the Gospel [53] , each might, in some measure, be able to assert its truth, and, if possible, to convince gainsayers [54] . Therefore, as we are often hinting at the chief arguments, on which this sacred cause is established, established, I trust, so firmly, that the gates of hell shall never prevail against it [55] ; so, I thought, it might be agreeable and useful, on this occasion, to state them a little more largely, in their proper connexion and mutual dependence. And I chose rather to do it, as these sermons are especially intended for young people, who, in an age in which infidelity so much abounds, can hardly expect to pass through the world, if they, are called to converse much in it, without some attacks on their faith; which may be very dangerous, if they are not provided with some armour of proof against them. It is, indeed, (as I before observed,) above all things to be desired, that the heart may be established with grace [56] ; for we are then most secure from the danger of forgetting God's precepts [57] , when they have been the blessed means of quickening us to a divine life. Yet, as other arguments have their use, and, in some degree, their necessity too, I shall go on briefly to propose them. I beg, therefore, that you would renew your attention, while I resume the thread of my discourse, an entire dependence on the blessed Spirit, by whom the Gospel was at first revealed and confirmed, to add success to this humble attempt for its service and for your edification. I am now shewing you, that Christianity, which before appeared in theory probable and rational, has, in fact evidence: not only that it may be, but that it certainly is, true; -- as it is certain, that the New Testament, as now in your hands, is genuine; -- and as it may, with great evidence, be argued from hence, that the Gospel is a revelation from God. The first of these points I have endeavoured to prove at large; and, without repeating what I said in confirmation of it, I now proceed to shew, "That, from allowing the New Testament to be genuine, it will certainly follow, that Christianity is a divine revelation." And, here, a man is, at first, ready to be lost in the multiplicity of arguments which surround him. It is very easy to find proofs; but difficult to range and dispose them in such an order, as best to illustrate and confirm each other. Now I choose to offer them in the following series, which seems to me the most natural, and, perhaps, may be most intelligible to you. The authors of the books contained in the New Testament were certainly capable of judging concerning the truth of the facts they attested: -- their character, so far as we can judge of it by their writings, renders them worthy of regard; -- and they were under no

temptation to attempt to impose on the world, by such a story as they have given us, if it had been false: so that, considering all things, there, is no reason to believe they would attempt it: -- but, if they had, they must probably have perished in the attempt, and could never have gained credit in the world, had their testimony been false. -- Nevertheless, it is certain, in fact, that they did gain credit, and succeed in a most amazing manner against all opposition. -- It is certain, therefore, that the facts they assert were true; and, if they were true, then it was reasonable for their contemporaries, and is reasonable for us, to receive the Gospel as a divine revelation; -- especially, if we consider what has happened in the world for the confirmation of it, since it was first propagated by them. This is the conclusion, to which I was to lead you; and I beg you would seriously consider each of the steps, by which we arrive at it.¹ It is exceeding evident, "that the writers of the New Testament certainly knew, whether the facts they asserted were true or false." And this they must have known, for this plain reason; because they tell us, they did not trust merely to the report, even of persons whom they thought most credible; but were present themselves when several of the most important facts happened, and so received them on the testimony of their own senses. On this, St. John, in his Epistle, lays a very great and reasonable stress: that which we have seen with our eyes, and that not only by a sudden glance, but which we have attentively looked upon, and which even our hands have handled of the word of life, i. e. of Christ and his Gospel, -- declare we unto you [58] . Let the common sense of mankind judge here. Did not Matthew and John certainly know, whether they had personally and familiarly conversed with Jesus of Nazareth, or not? Whether he had chosen them for his constant attendants and apostles? whether they had seen him heal the sick, dispossess devils, and raise the dead? and whether they themselves had received from him such miraculous endowments, as they say he bestowed upon them? Did not they know, whether, he fell into the hands of his enemies, and was publicly put to death, or not? Did nor John know, whether he saw him expiring on the cross, or not? and whether he received from him the dying charge which he records [59] ? Did he not know, whether he saw him wounded in the side with a spear, or not? and whether he did, or did not, see, that effusion of blood and water, which was an infallible argument of his being really dead? concerning which, it being so material a circumstance, he adds, he that saw it bears record, and he knoweth that he saith true [60] ; i. e. that it was a case, in which he could not possibly be deceived. And, with regard to Christ's resurrection, did not certainly know, whether he saw our Lord again and again; and, whether he handled his body, that he might be sure it was not a mere phantom? What one circumstance of his life could he certainly know, if he were deceived in this? Did not Luke know, whether he was in the ship with Paul, when that extraordinary wreck happened, by which they were thrown ashore on the island of Malta? Did he not know, whether, while they were lodged together in the governor's house, Paul miraculously healed one of the family, and many other diseased persons in the island, as he positively asserts he did [61] ? Did not Paul certainly know, whether Christ appeared to him on the way to Damascus, or not? Whether he was blind, and afterwards, on the prayer of a fellow-disciple, received his sight? or, was that a circumstance, in which there could be room for mistake? did he not know, whether he received such extraordinary revelations, and extraordinary powers, as to be able, by the imposition of his hands, or by the words of his mouth, to work miracles, and even to convey supernatural endowments to others. To add no more, did not Peter know, whether he saw the glory of Christ's transfiguration, and heard that voice, to which he expressly refers, when he says in the text, we have not followed cunningly deviled fables, -- but were eye-witnesses of his majesty, -- when there

came such a voice to him; and this voice we heard [62] .Now Matthew, John, Luke, Paul, and Peter, are by, far the most considerable writers of the New Testament; and I am sure, when you reflect on these particulars, you must own, that there are few historians, ancient or modern, that could so certainly judge of the truth of the facts they have related. You may perhaps think, I have enlarged too much, in stating so clear a case: but, you will please to remember, it is the foundation of the whole argument; and that this branch of it alone cuts off infidels from that refuge, which, I believe, they would generally choose, that of pleading the apostles were enthusiasts; and leaves them silent, unless they will say they were impostors: for, you evidently see, that, could we suppose these facts to be false, they could by no means pretend an involuntary mistake, but must, in the most criminal and aggravated sense, as Paul himself expresses it, be found false witnesses of God [63] . But how reasonable it would be to charge them with so notorious a crime, will in part appear, if we consider,2. "That the character of these writers, so far as we can judge by their works, seems to render them worthy of regard, and leaves no room to imagine they intended to deceive us."I shall not stay to shew at large, that they appear to have been persons of natural sense, and, at the time of their writing, of a composed mind; for, I verily believe, no man, that ever read the New Testament with attention, could believe they were idiots or madmen. Let the discourses of Christ, in the Evangelists, of Peter and Paul, in the Acts, as well as many passages in the Epistles, be perused; and I will venture to say, he, who is not charmed with them, must be a stranger to all the justest rules of polite criticism, but he, who suspects that the writers wanted common sense, must himself be most evidently destitute of it; and he, who can suspect they might possibly be distracted, must himself, in this instance at least, be just as mad as he imagines them to have been.It was necessary, however, just to touch upon this; because, unless we are satisfied that a person be himself in what he writes, we cannot pretend to determine his character from his writings. Having premised this, I must entreat you, as you peruse the New Testament, to observe what evident marks it bears of simplicity and integrity, of piety and benevolence; which, when you have observed, you will find them pleading the cause of its authors, with a resistless, though a gentle, eloquence; and powerfully persuading the mind, that men, who were capable of writing so excellently well, are not, without the strongest evidence, to be suspected of acting so detestably as we must suppose they did, if, in this solemn manner, they were carrying on an imposture, in such circumstances as attended the case before us. For, (1). The manner, in which they tell their amazing story, is most happily adapted to gain our belief. For, as they tell it with a great detail of circumstances, which would, by no means, be prudent in legendary writers, because it leaves so much the more room for confutation; so they, also, do it in the most easy and natural manner. There is no air of declamation and harangue; nothing that looks like artifice and design: no apologies, no encomiums, no characters, no reflections, no digressions: but the facts are recounted with great simplicity, just as they seem to have happened; and those facts are left to speak for themselves and their great Author. It is plain, that the rest of there writers, as well as the apostle Paul, did not affect excellency of speech or flights of eloquence, (as the phrase signifies,) but determined to know nothing, though amongst the most learned and polite, save Jesus Christ, even him that was crucified [64] : a conduct, that is the more to be admired, when we consider how extraordinary a theme theirs was, and with what abundant variety of most pathetic declamation it would easily have furnished any common writer; so that one would really wonder how they could forbear it. But they rightly judged, that a vain affectation of ornament, when recording such a story as of their own knowledge, might, perhaps, have brought their sincerity into question, and so have

rendered the cross of Christ of no effect [65] .(2). Their integrity does likewise evidently appear, in the freedom with which they mention those circumstances, which might have exposed their Master and themselves to the greatest contempt amongst prejudiced and inconsiderate men, such as they knew they must generally expect to meet with. -- As to their Master, they scruple not to own, that his country was infamous [66] , his birth and education mean [67] , and his life indigent [68] ; that he was most disdainfully rejected by the rulers [69] , and accused of sabbath-breaking [70] , blasphemy [71] , and sedition [72] ; that he was reviled by the populace as a debauchee [73] , a lunatic [74] , and a dæmoniac [75] ; and, at last, by the united rage of both rulers and people, was publicly executed as the vilest of malefactors, with all imaginable circumstances of ignominy, scorn, and abhorrence [76] : nor do they scruple to own, that terror and distress of spirit into which he was thrown by his sufferings [77] , though this was a circumstance at which some of the heathens took the greatest offence, as utterly unworthy so excellent and divine a person. -- As to themselves, the apostles readily confess, not only the meanness of their original employments [78] , and the scandals of their former life [79] , but their prejudices, their follies, and their faults, after Christ had honoured them with so holy a calling: they acknowledge their slowness of apprehension under so excellent a teacher [80] , their unbelief [81] , their cowardice [82] , their ambition [83] , their rash zeal [84] , and their foolish contentions [85] . So that, on the whole, they seem every where to forget, that they are writing of themselves, and appear not at all solicitous about their own reputation, but, only, that they might represent the matter just as it was, whether they went through honour or dishonour, through evil report or good report [86] . Nor is this all; for,(3). It is certain, that there are in their writings the most genuine traces; not only of a plain and honest, but a most pious and devout, a most benevolent and generous, disposition. These appear, especially, in the epistolary parts of the New Testament, where, indeed, we should reasonably expect to find them: and of these I may confidently affirm, that the greater progress any one has made, in love to God [87] , in zeal for his glory [88] , in a compassionate and generous concern for the present and future happiness of mankind [89] ; the more humble [90] , and candid [91] , and temperate [92] , and pure [93] , he is; the more ardently he loves truth, and the more steadily he is determined to suffer the greatest extremity in its defence [94] ; in a word, the more his heart is weaned from the present world [95] , and the more it is fired with the prospects of a glorious immortality [96] ; the more pleasure will he take in reading those writings, the more will he relish the spirit which discovers itself in them, and find, that, as face answers to face in water, so do the traces of piety and goodness, which appear there, answer to those which a good man feels in his own soul. Nay, I will add, that the warm and genuine workings of that excellent and holy temper, which every where discovers itself in the New Testament, have, for many ages, been the most effectual means of spreading a spirit of virtue and piety in the world; and what of it is to be found in these degenerate days seems principally owing to there incomparable and truly divine writings. Where then there are such genuine marks of an excellent character, not only in laboured discourses, but in epistolary writings, and those, sometimes, addressed to particular and intimate friends, to whom the mind naturally opens itself with the greatest freedom, surely no candid and equitable judge would lightly believe them to be all counterfeit; or would imagine, without strong proof, that persons, who breathe such exalted sentiments of virtue and piety, should be guilty of any notorious wickedness: and, in proportion to the degree of enormity and aggravation attending such a supposed crime, it may justly be expected, that the evidence of their having really committed it should be unanswerably strong and convincing. Now, it is most certain, on the

principles laid down above, that, if the testimony of the apostles was false, they must have acted as detestable and villanous a part as one can easily conceive. To be found (as the apostle, with his usual energy, expresses it) false witnesses of God [97] in any single instance, and solemnly to declare him miraculously to have done what we know in our own consciences was never done at all, would be an audacious degree of impiety, to which none but the most abandoned of mankind could arrive. Yet, if the testimony of the apostles was false, as we have proved they could not be themselves mistaken in it, this must have been their conduct, and that, not in one single instance only, but in a thousand. Their life must, in effect, be one continued and perpetual scene of perjury; and all the most solemn actions of it (in which they were speaking to God, or speaking of him, as the God and Father of Christ, from whom they received their mission and powers) must be a most profane and daring insult on all the acknowledged perfections of his nature. And the inhumanity of such a conduct would, on the whole, have been equal to its impiety: for, it was deceiving men in their most important interests, and persuading them to venture their whole future happiness on the power and fidelity of one, whom, on this supposition, they knew to have been an impostor, and justly to have suffered a capital punishment for his crimes. It would have been great guilt, to have given the hearts and devotions of men so wrong a turn, even though they had found magistrates ready to espouse and establish, yea, and to enforce, the religion they taught. But to labour to propagate it in the midst of the most vigorous and severe opposition from them, must equally enhance the guilt and folly of the undertaking: for, by this means, they made themselves accessory to the ruin of thousands; and all the calamities, which fell on such proselytes, or even their descendants, for the sake of Christianity, would be, in a great measure, chargeable on these first preachers of it. The blood of honest, yea, and (supposing them, as you must, to have been involuntarily deceived,) of pious, worthy, and heroic persons, who might otherwise have been the greatest blessings to the public, would, in effect, be crying for vengeance against them; and the distresses of the widows and orphans, which those martyrs might leave behind them, would join to swell the account. So that, on the whole, the guilt of those malefactors, who are, from time to time, the victims of public justice, even for robbery, murder, or treason, is small, when compared with that which we have now been supposing: and, corrupt as human nature is, it appears to me utterly improbable, that twelve men should be found, I will not say, in one little nation; but even on the whole face of the earth, who could be capable of entering into so black a confederacy, on any terms whatsoever. And now, in this view of the case, make a serious pause, and compare with it what we have just been saying of the character of the apostles of Jesus, so far as an indifferent person could conjecture it from their writings; and then say, whether you can, in your hearts, believe them to have been these abandoned wretches, at once the reproach and astonishment of mankind? You cannot, surely, believe such things of any, and much less, of them; unless it shall appear, they were in some peculiar circumstances of strong temptation; and, what those circumstances could be, it is difficult even for imagination to conceive. But history is so far from suggesting any unthought-of fact, to help our imagination on this head, that it bears strongly the contrary way; and hardly any part of my work is easier, than to shew,³ "That they were under no temptation to forge a story of this kind, or to publish it to the world, knowing it to be false." They could reasonably expect no gain, no reputation by it: but, on the contrary, supposing it an imposture, they must, with the most ordinary share of prudence, have foreseen infamy and ruin, as the certain consequences of attempting it. For, the ground foundation of their scheme was, that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified at Jerusalem by the Jewish rulers, was the Son of God, and

the Lord of all things. I appeal to your consciences, whether this looks at all like the contrivance of artful and designing men. It was evidently charging upon the princes of their country the most criminal and aggravated murder; indeed, all things considered, the most enormous act of wickedness which the sun had ever seen. They might, therefore, depend upon it, that these rulers would immediately employ all their art and power to confute their testimony and to destroy their persons. Accordingly, one of them was presently stoned [98] , and another quickly after beheaded [99] ; and most of the rest were scattered abroad into strange cities [100] , where they would be sure to be received with great prejudices raised against them amongst the Jews, by reports from Jerusalem, [101] and vastly strengthened by the expectation of a temporal Messiah; expectations, which, as the apostles knew by their own experience, it was exceeding difficult to root out of men's minds; expectations, which would render the doctrine of Christ crucified an insuperable stumbling-block to the Jews [102] . Nor, could they expect a much better reception amongst the Gentiles; with whom their business was, to persuade them to renounce the gods of their ancestors, and to depend on a person who had died the death of a malefactor and a slave; to persuade them to forego pompous idolatries in which they had been educated, and all the sensual indulgences with which their religion (if it might be called a religion) was attended; to worship one invisible God, through one Mediator, in the most plain and simple manner; and to receive a set of precepts, most directly calculated to control and restrain, not only the enormities of men's actions, but the irregularities of their hearts. A most difficult undertaking! and, to engage them to this, they had no other arguments to bring, but such as were taken from the views of an invisible state of happiness or misery, of which they asserted their crucified Jesus to be the supreme disposer; who should, another day, dispense his blessings or his vengeance, as the Gospel had been embraced or rejected. Now, could it be imagined, that men would easily be persuaded, merely on the credit of their affirmation, or in compliance with their importunity, to believe things, which, to their prejudiced minds, would appear so improbable, and to submit to impositions to their corrupt inclinations so insupportable? And, if they could not persuade them to it, what could the apostles then expect? what, but to be insulted as fools or madmen, by one sort of people; and, by another, to be persecuted with the most savage and outrageous cruelty, as blasphemers of the gods, as seducers of the people, and as disturbers of the public peace? All which we know accordingly happened [103] : nay, they assure us, that their Lord had often warned them of it [104] ; and that they themselves expected it [105] , and thought it necessary to admonish their followers to expect it too [106] : and, it appears, that, far from drawing back upon that account, as they would surely have done if they had been governed by secular motives, they became so much the more zealous and courageous, and encouraged each other to resist even to blood [107] . -- Now, as this is a great evidence of the integrity and piety of their character, and thus illustrates the former head; so it serves to the purpose now immediately in view, i. e. it proves how improbable it is, that any person of common sense should engage in an imposture, from which (as many have justly observed) they could, on their own principles, have nothing to expect, but ruin in this world and damnation in the next. When, therefore, we consider and compare their character and their circumstances, it appears utterly improbable, on various accounts, that they would have attempted, in this article, to impose on the world. But, suppose that, in consequence of some unaccountable as well as undiscoverable frenzy, they had ventured on the attempt, it is easy to shew,⁴ "That, humanly speaking, they must quickly have perished in it, and their foolish cause must have died with them, without ever gaining any credit in the world." One may venture to say

this in general, on the principles which I before laid down: but it appears still more evident, when we consider the nature of the fact they asserted, in conjunction with the methods they took to engage men to believe it; methods, which, had the apostles been impostors, must have had the most direct tendency to ruin both their scheme and themselves.(1). Let us a little more particularly reflect on the nature of that grand fact, the death, resurrection, and exaltation, of Christ; which, as I observed, was the great foundation of the Christian scheme, as first exhibited by the apostles. -- The resurrection of a dead man, and his ascension into, and abode in, the upper world, was so strange a thing, that a thousand objections would immediately be raised against it; and some extraordinary proof would justly be required as a balance to them. Now I wish the rejecters of the Gospel would set themselves to invent some hypothesis, which should have an appearance of probability, to shew how such an amazing story should ever gain credit in the world, if it had not some very convincing proof. Where, and when, could it first begin to be received? Was it in the same or a succeeding age? Was it at Jerusalem, the spot of ground on which it is said to have happened, or in Greece, or Italy, or Asia, or Africa? You may change the scene, and the time, as you please, but you cannot change the difficulty. Take it in a parallel instance. Suppose twelve men in London were now to affirm, that a person executed there as a malefactor, in a public manner, a month or six weeks ago, or, if you please, a year, or five or ten years since, (for, it is much the same,) was a prophet sent from God with extraordinary powers, that he was raised from the dead, that they conversed with him after his revival, and at last saw him taken up into heaven: would their united testimony make them be believed there? -- Or, suppose them, if you please, to disperse, and that one or two of them should come hither, and go on to more distant places, suppose Leicester, Nottingham, or York, and tell their story there; and that others were to carry it over to Paris, or Amsterdam, or to Vienna, or Madrid: could they expect any more credit with us or with them; or hope for any thing better, than to be looked upon as lunatics, and treated as such? -- And if they should go into other places, and attempt to mend their scheme, by saying their master was put to death 100 or 200 years ago, when there could be no historical evidence of it discovered, and no proof given but their own confident assertion, would they remove, or would they not rather increase, the difficulty? -- Or, would they, in any of these cases, gain credit by the most dexterous tricks of legerdemain, of which you can suppose them masters? especially if they should undertake, in consequence of such supposed facts, to engage men to renounce the religion in which they had been educated; to deny themselves in their dearest passions, and most important worldly interests; and even, probably, to hazard their liberties and their lives, in dependance on a future reward, to be received in a place and state, which no man living on earth had ever seen or known? You would readily allow this to be an insupposable case: and why should you suppose it to have happened sixteen or seventeen hundred years ago? You may assure yourselves, that the reason and the passion of mankind were then as strong as they are now. -- But let us a little more particularly consider, (2). The manner in which the apostles undertook to prove the truth of their testimony to this fact; and it will evidently appear, that, instead of confirming their scheme, it must have been sufficient utterly to have overthrown it, had it been itself the most probable imposture that the wit of man could ever have contrived. -- You know, they did not merely assert, that they had seen miracles wrought by this Jesus, but that he had endowed themselves with a variety of miraculous powers. And these they undertook to display, not in such idle and useless tricks as sleight of hand might perform, but in such solid and important works, as appeared worthy a divine interposition, and entirely superior to human power; restoring, as they

pretend, sight to the blind, soundness to lepers, activity to the lame, and; in some instances, life to the dead. Nor were these things undertaken in a corner, in a circle of friends or dependants; nor were they said to be wrought on such as might be suspected of being confederates in the fraud; but they were done often in the public streets, in the sight of enemies, on the persons of such as were utter strangers to the apostles, but sometimes well known to neighbours and spectators as having long laboured under these calamities, to human skill utterly incurable [108] . Would impostors have made such pretensions as there? Or, if they had, must they not immediately have been exposed and ruined? Nor is there any room at all to object, that, perhaps, the apostles might not undertake to do these things on the spot, but only assert they had done them elsewhere: for, even then, it would have been impossible they should have gained credit; and they would have seemed the less credible, on account, of such a pretence. Whatever appearances there might have been of gravity, integrity, and piety, in the conversation of Peter, (for instance,) very few, especially few that had known but little of him, would have taken it upon his word, that he saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead at Bethany: but fewer yet would have believed it upon his affirmation, had it been ever so solemn, that he had himself raised Dorcas at Joppa; unless he had done some extraordinary work before them, correspondent, at least, if not equal to that. You will easily think of invincible objections, which otherwise might have been made; and, undoubtedly, the more such assertions have been multiplied, every new person, and scene, and fact, had been an additional advantage given to the enemy, to have detected and confuted the whole scheme, which Peter and his associates had thus endeavoured to establish. But to come still closer to the point: if the New Testament be genuine, (as I have already proved it,) then, it is certain that the apostles pretend to have wrought miracles in the very presence of those, to whom their writings were addressed; nay, more, they profess likewise to have conferred those miraculous gifts, in some considerable degrees, on others [109] , even on the very persons to whom they write; and they appeal to their consciences as to the truth of it. And could there possibly be room for delusion here? It is exceedingly remarkable to this purpose, that Paul makes this appeal to the Corinthians [110] and Galatians [111] , when there were amongst them some persons disaffected to him, who were taking all opportunities to sink his character and destroy his influence. And could they have wished for a better opportunity than such an appeal? an appeal, which, had not the fact it supposed been certain, far from recovering those that were wavering in their esteem, must have been sufficient utterly to disgust his most cordial and steady friends. -- And the same remark may be applied to the advices and reproofs, which the apostle there gives, relating to the use and abuse of their spiritual gifts [112] ; which had been most notoriously absurd, and even ridiculous, had not the Christians, to whom he wrote, been really possessed of them. And these gifts were so plainly supernatural, that, (as it has often been observed,) if it be allowed that miracles can prove a divine revelation, and that the first epistle to the Corinthians be genuine, (of which, by the way, there is at least as pregnant evidence as that any part of the New Testament is so [113] ,) then it follows, by a sure and easy consequence, that Christianity is true. Nevertheless, other arguments are not to be forgotten in this survey. -- And, therefore, as I have proved under this head, that, had the testimony of the apostles been false, it is not to be imagined, that they could have gained credit at all; and especially when they had put the proof of their cause on such a footing as we are sure they did; I am now to shew you, 5. "That it is certain, in fact, that the apostles did gain early credit; and succeeded in a most wonderful manner;" whence it will follow, that their testimony was true. That the apostles did indeed gain credit in the world is evident, from what I before offered to

prove the early prevalence of Christianity in it; and may farther be confirmed from many passages in the New Testament. And, here, I insist not so much on express historical testimonies, though some of them are very remarkable; especially, that of the brethren at Jerusalem, who speak of many myriads of believing Jews assembled at the Feast of Pentecost [114] : but I argue from the epistles written to several churches, which plainly prove, that there were congregations of Christians in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Colosse, Thessalonica, Philippi, Loadicea [115] , Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia [116] , Crete [117] , Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia [118] , and other places; insomuch, that one of the apostles could say, that Christ had so wrought by him, to make the Gentiles obedient, not only in word or profession, but in deed too, that from Jerusalem, even round about unto Illyricum, he had fully preached the Gospel of Christ [119] , or, as the word imports [120] , had accomplished the purposes of it. And there is a great deal of reason, both from the nature of the thing, and from the testimony of ancient history [121] , to believe that others of the apostles had considerable success elsewhere: so that Paul might with reason apply to them and their doctrine, what is originally spoken of the luminaries of heaven and the instruction they communicate, -- their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world [122] . So great was the number of those, who were proselyted to Christianity by the preaching of the apostles; and we have all imaginable reason to believe, that there were none of all these proselytes, but what were fully persuaded of the truth of the testimony they bore; for, otherwise, no imaginable reason can be given for their entering themselves into such a profession. The apostles had no secular terrors to affright them, no secular rewards to bribe them [123] , no dazzling eloquence to enchant them [124] ; on the contrary, all these were in a powerful manner pleading against the apostles: yet, their testimony was received, and their new converts were so thoroughly satisfied with the evidence which they gave them of their mission, that they encountered great persecutions, and cheerfully ventured estate, liberty, and life itself, on the truth of the facts they asserted; as plainly appears from many passages in the Epistles, which none can think the apostles would have ever written, if these first Christians had not been in a persecuted condition [125] . Nor will it signify any thing to object, that most of these converts were persons of a low rank and ordinary education, who, therefore, might be more easily imposed upon than others: for, (not to mention Sergius Paulus, Dionysius the Areopagite, or the domestics of Cæsar's household, with others of superior stations in life,) it is sufficient to remind you, that, as I have largely shewn, the apostles did not put their cause on the issue of laboured arguments, in which the populace might quickly have been entangled and lost, but on such plain facts, as they might judge of as easily and surely as any others; indeed, on what they themselves saw, and, in part too, on what they felt. Now, I apprehend, this might be sufficient to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. You have seen, that as there is no reason to believe, that the apostles, who certainly knew the truth, would have attempted a fraud of this kind; -- so, if they had attempted it, they could not possibly have succeeded; -- nevertheless, they did succeed in a very remarkable manner; whence it plainly follows, that what they testified was true. And now then, after this, the reasonableness of receiving the Gospel, on admitting the truth of what they testified concerning Christ, is an easy consequence. -- Yet, some things are to be offered under this head, which are of great weight, and would not so conveniently have fallen under any of the former: and some considerable additional evidence to the truth of Christianity arises, from what has happened in the world since its first propagation. And, therefore, I choose rather to make a distinct discourse on these, with the improvement of the whole, than to throw together the hints of them in so hasty a

manner as I must do, should I attempt to dispatch the subject in this discourse, the just limits of which. I have already transgressed, lest the great chain of the argument should be broken.

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY, AND REFLECTIONS ON THE WHOLE. 2 PET. i. 16.

-- WE HAVE NOT FOLLOWED CUNNINGLY DEVISED FABLES. -- AS I had before proved the books of the New Testament to be genuine, I proceeded in my last discourse to argue thence the certain truth of the Christian revelation; and we have made some considerable progress in the argument. The matter, in short, stand thus. -- The authors of the New Testament certainly knew, whether the facts they asserted were true or false; so that they could not themselves be deceived: -- neither can we think they would attempt to deceive others, since they appear, by their manner of writing, to have been persons of great integrity and goodness; -- and, it is likewise evident, they could have no temptation to attempt a fraud of this nature: -- however, if they had attempted it, we cannot imagine they could have gained credit in the world, if the facts they asserted had not been true: -- nevertheless, they did gain credit in a very remarkable manner; whence it plainly follows that those facts were true. -- Now I am to shew farther, to complete the proof of our grand proposition,⁶ "That, admitting the facts which they testify concerning Christ to be true, then it was reasonable for their contemporaries, and is reasonable for us, to receive the Gospel, which they have transmitted to us, as a divine revelation." The great thing they asserted was, that Jesus was the Christ, and that he was proved to be so, -- by prophecies accomplished in him, and by miracles wrought by him, and by others in his name. Let us attend to each of these, and, I am persuaded, we shall find them no contemptible arguments; but must be forced to acknowledge, that, the premises being established, the conclusion most easily and necessarily follows: and this conclusion, that Jesus is the Christ, taken in all its extent, is an abstract of the Gospel-revelation, and, therefore, is sometimes put for the whole of it [126]. The apostles, especially when disputing with the Jews, did frequently argue from "the prophecies of the Old Testament;" in which, they say, many things were expressly foretold, which were most literally and exactly fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth [127]. Now, greatly to the evidence, confirmation, and advantage of Christianity, so it is that these prophecies are to this day extant in their original language; and this, in the hands of a people most implacably averse to the Gospel: so that an attentive reader may still, in a great measure, satisfy himself, as to the validity of the argument drawn from them. On searching these ancient and important records, we find, not only in the general, that God intended to raise up for his people an illustrious Deliverer, who, amongst other glorious titles, is sometimes called the Messiah, or the Anointed One [128]: but we are more particularly told, that this great event should happen before the government ceased in the tribe of Judah [129]; while the second temple was standing [130]; and a little before its destruction, about 490 years after a command given to rebuild Jerusalem [131]; which was probably issued out in the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, or, at least, within a few years before or after it. It is predicted, that he should be the seed of Abraham [132], born of a virgin of the house of David [133], in the town of Bethlehem [134]; that he should be anointed with an extraordinary effusion of the Divine Spirit [135], in virtue of which, he should not only be a perfect and illustrious example of universal holiness and goodness [136], but should also perform many extraordinary and beneficial miracles [137];

nevertheless, that, for want of external pomp and splendour, he should be rejected and insulted by the Jews [138] , and, at length, be cut off and slain by them [139] . It is added, that he should arise from the dead before his body should be corrupted in the grave [140] ; and should be received up to heaven, and there seated at the right hand of God [141] ; whence he should, in a wonderful manner, pour out his Spirit on his followers [142] ; in consequence of which, though the body of the Jewish people perished in their obstinate opposition to him [143] , yet the Gentiles should be brought to the knowledge of the true God [144] , and a kingdom established amongst them, which, from small beginnings, should spread itself to the ends of the earth, and continue to the remotest ages [145] . Besides these most material circumstances, there were several others relating to him, which were either expressly foretold, or, at least, hinted at; all which, with those already mentioned, had so evident an accomplishment in Jesus, (allowing the truth of the facts which the apostles testified concerning him,) that we have no reason to wonder, that they should receive the word with all readiness, who searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so predicted there, as the apostles affirmed [146] . For, I am persuaded, that no wise and religious person could imagine, that God would permit an impostor to arise, in whom so great a variety of predictions, delivered by so many different persons, and in so many distant ages, should have an exact accomplishment. When the apostles were preaching to heathens, it is, indeed, true, that they generally waved the argument from prophecy, because they were not so capable judges of it: but, then, they insist on another, which might as soon captivate their belief, and as justly vindicate it, I mean, "the miracles performed by Christ, and those commissioned and influenced by him." Many of these were of such a nature as not to admit of any artifice or deceit: especially, that most signal one, of his resurrection from the dead, which I may call a miracle performed by, as well as upon, Christ; because he so expressly declares, that he had himself a power to resume his life at pleasure [147] . The apostles well knew this was a fact of such a nature, that they who believed this would never doubt of the rest; they, therefore, often single this out, and lay the whole stress of their cause upon it [148] . This they proved to be true, by their own testimony miraculously confirmed; and, in proving this, they establish Christianity on an impregnable rock. For, I may safely refer it to any of you to judge, whether it is an imaginable thing, that God should raise the dead body of an impostor; especially, when he had solemnly appealed to such a resurrection as the grand proof of his mission, and had expressly fixed the very day on which it was to happen [149] . I persuade myself you are convinced by all this, that they, who on the apostles testimony believed that the prophecies of the Old Testament were accomplished in Jesus, and that God bore witness to him by miracles, and raised him from the dead, had abundant reason to believe that the doctrine which Christ taught was divine, and his Gospel a revelation from heaven. And, if they had reason to admit this conclusion, then, it is plain, that we, who have such satisfactory evidence, on the one hand, that the testimony of the apostles was credible, and, on the other, that this was the substance of it, have reason also to admit this grand inference from it, and to embrace the Gospel as a faithful saying, and as well worthy of all acceptance [150] . This is the thing I was attempting to prove; and here I should end the argument, were it not for the confirmation it may receive from some additional considerations, which could not properly be introduced under any of the preceding heads. I add, therefore, 7. In the last place, "that the truth of the Gospel has received farther, and very considerable confirmation, from what has happened in the world since it was first published." And here I must desire you more particularly to consider, -- on the one hand, what God has been doing to establish it; -- and, on the other, the methods which its enemies have taken to

destroy it.(1.) Consider "what God has been doing to confirm the Gospel since its first publication," and you will find it a farther evidence of its divine original.I might here argue at large, from its surprising propagation in the world; -- from the miraculous powers, with which, not only the apostles, but succeeding preachers of the Gospel, and other converts, were endowed; -- from the accomplishment of prophecies recorded in the New Testament; -- and from the preservation of the Jews as a distinct people, notwithstanding the various difficulties and persecutions through which they have passed.I might particularly urge, in confirmation of the truth of Christianity, "the wonderful success with which it was attended, and the surprising propagation of the Gospel in the world."I have before endeavoured, under a former head, to shew you, that the Gospel met with so favourable a reception in the world, as evidently proved, that its first publishers were capable of producing such evidence of its truth as an imposture could not admit. But, now, I carry the remark farther, and assert, that, considering the circumstances of the case, it is amazing that even truth itself, under so many disadvantages, should have so illustrious a triumph; and that its wonderful success does evidently argue such an extraordinary interposition of God in its favour, as may justly be called a miraculous attestation to it.There was not only one of a family or two of a city taken, and brought to Zion [151] ; but so did the Lord hasten it in its appointed time, that a little one became a thousand, and a small one a strong nation [152] . And, as the apostles themselves were honoured with very remarkable success, so, this divine seed was propagated so fast in the next age, that Pliny testifies, "he found the heathen temples in Achaia almost deserted [153] ;" and Tertullian afterwards boasts, "that all places but those temples were filled with Christians; so that, were they only to withdraw, cities and provinces would be depopulated [154] ." [Nor did the Gospel only triumph thus within the boundaries of the Roman empire; for, long before Tertullian was born, Justin Martyr, in his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, which seems to have been written not much above 100 years after Christ's death, declares, "that there was no nation of men, whether Greeks or barbarians, not excepting those savages that wandered in clans from one region to another, and had no fixed habitation, who had not learnt to offer prayers and thanksgivings to the Father and Maker of all, in the name of Jesus who was crucified [155] ."] Now, how can we account for such a scene as this, but by saying, that the hand of the Lord was with the first preachers of the Gospel, and, therefore, such multitudes believed and turned unto the Lord [156] ? How had it been possible that so small a fountain should presently have swelled into a mighty river, and even have covered the face of the earth, had it not sprung from the sanctuary of God, and been rendered thus triumphant by his almighty arm?Had this new religion, so directly contrary to all the prejudices of education, been contrived to sooth men's vices, to assert their errors, to defend superstitions, or to promote their secular interests, we might easily have accounted for its prevalence in the world. Had its preachers been very profound philosophers, or polite and fashionable orators, many might have been charmed, at least for a while, to follow them; or, had the princes and potentates of the earth declared themselves its patrons, and armed their legions for its defence and propagation, multitudes might have been terrified into the profession, though not a soul could, by such means, have been rationally persuaded to the belief of it. But, without some such advantages as these, we can hardly conceive how any new religion should so strangely prevail; even though it had crept into the world in its darkest ages and most barbarous countries, and though it had been gradually proposed in the most artful manner, with the finest veil industriously drawn over every part which might at first have given disgust to the beholder.But you well know that the very reverie of all this was the case here. You know, from the apparent constitution of Christianity, that the lusts and

errors, the superstitions and interests, of carnal men would immediately rise up against it as a most irreconcilable enemy. You know, that the learning and wit of the Greeks and the Romans were early employed to overbear and ridicule it. You know, that, as all the herd of heathen deities were to be discarded, the priests, who subsisted on that craft, must in interest find themselves obliged to oppose it. You know, that the princes of the earth drew their swords against it, and armed torments and death for the destruction of its followers. And yet you see that it triumphed over all, though published in ages and places of the greatest learning and refinement; and proposed, not in an ornamental and artificial manner, but with the utmost plainness: the doctrines of the cross being always avowed as its grand fundamentals, though so notorious a stumbling-block both to Jews and Gentiles [157] ; [and the absolute necessity, not only of embracing Christianity, but also of renouncing all idol-worship, being insisted on immediately, and in the strongest terms, though it must make the Gospel appear the most singular and unsociable religion that had ever been taught in the world.] Had one of the wits or politicians of these ages seen the apostles, and a few other plain men, whet had been educated amongst the lowest of the people, as most of the first teachers of Christianity were, going out, armed with nothing but faith, truth, and goodness, to encounter the power of princes, the bigotry of priests, the learning of philosophers, the rage of the populace, and the prejudices of all; how would he have derided the attempt, and said, with Sanballat, What will these feeble Jews do [158] ? But, had he seen the event, surely, he must have owned, with the Egyptian magi, in a far less illustrious miracle, that it was the finger of God [159] , and might justly have fallen on his face, even amongst those whom he had insulted, with an humble acknowledgement that God was in them of a truth [160] . I might here farther urge "those miracles, which were wrought in confirmation of the Christian doctrine, for a considerable time after the death of the apostles." The most signal and best attested of these was the dispossession of devils; whom God seems to have permitted to rage with an unusual violence about those times, that his Son's triumph over them might be so much the more remarkable, and that the old serpent might be taken in his own craftiness. I doubt not, but many of you have heard, that, more than two hundred years after the death of Christ, some of the most celebrated defenders of the Gospel, which the church has in any age produced, I mean Tertullian [161] , and Minutius Fælix [162] , do not only challenge any of their heathen enemies and persecutors to bring them a demoniac, engaging, at the hazard of their lives, to oblige the evil spirit, in the name and by the authority of Christ, to quit his possessions; but do also appeal to it as a fact publicly known, that those, who were agitated by such spirits, mood terrified and amazed in the pretence of a Christian, and that their pretended gods were compelled then to confess themselves devils. I wave the testimonies of some later writers of the Christian church, lest the credulity of their temper, joined with the circumstances attending some of the facts they record, should furnish out objections against their testimony; though, I think, we cannot, without great injustice to the character of the learned and pious Augustin, suspect the truth of some amazing facts of this kind, which he has attested as of his own personal and certain knowledge [163] . Nor must I, on this occasion, forget to mention the accomplishment of several prophecies, recorded "in the New Testament," as a farther confirmation given by God to the Gospel. The most eminent and single instance, under this head, is that of our Lord's prediction concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, as it is recorded by St. Matthew in his twenty-fourth chapter. The tragical history of it is most circumstantially described by Josephus, a Jewish priest, who was an eye-witness of it; and the description he has given of this sad calamity so exactly corresponds to the prophecy, that one

would have thought, had we not known the contrary, that it had been written by a Christian on purpose to illustrate it: [and one can never enough admire that series of amazing providences, by which the author was preserved from the most imminent danger; that he might leave us that invaluable treasure which his writings contain [164] .We have no need of any farther evidence, than we find in him, of the exact accomplishment of what was prophesied concerning the destruction of Jerusalem: but our Lord had also foretold the long continued desolation of their temple [165] ; and I cannot forbear reminding you of the awful sanction that was given to that part of the prediction: for it is well known, that a heathen historian has assured us, that when Julian, the apostate, in deliberate contempt of that prediction, solemnly and resolutely undertook to rebuild it, his impious design was miraculously frustrated again and again, and the workmen consumed by globes of fire, which broke out from the foundations [166] .]The prediction of St. Paul concerning the man of sin, and the apostasy of the later times [167] , is also well worthy of our remark. And, though a great deal of the book of Revelation be still concealed under a dark veil, yet, the division of the Roman empire into ten kingdoms, the usurpation, persecutions, and idolatry, of the Romish church, and the long duration of the papal power, with several other extraordinary events, which no human prudence could have foreseen, and which have happened long since the publication of that book, are so clearly foretold there, that I cannot but look on that part of Scripture as an invaluable treasure [168] ; and think it not at all improbable, that the more visible accomplishment of some of its other prophecies may be a great means of reviving the Christian cause, which is at present so much on the decline [169] . "The preservation of the Jews as a distinct people" is another particular, under this head, which well deserves our attentive regard. It is plain they are vastly numerous, notwithstanding all the slaughter and destruction of this people in former and in later ages. They are dispersed in various most distant nations, and particularly in those parts of the world where Christianity is professed: and, though they are exposed to great hatred and contempt, on account of their different faith, and in most places subjected to civil incapacities, if not to unchristian severities; yet they are still most obstinately tenacious of their religion; which is the more wonderful, as their fathers were so prone to apostatize from it; and as most of them seem to be utter strangers either to piety or humanity, and pour out the greatest contempt on the moral precepts of their own law, while they are so attached to the ceremonial institutions of it, troublesome and inconvenient as they are. Now seriously reflect what an evident hand of Providence is here; that, by their dispersion, preservation, and adherence to their religion, it should come to pass, that Christians should daily see the accomplishment of many remarkable prophecies concerning this people [170] ; and that we should always have amongst us such a crowd of unexceptionable witnesses to the truth of those ancient Hebrew records, on which so much of the evidence of the Gospel depends: records, which are many of them so full to the purpose for which we allege them, that, (as a celebrated writer very well observes [171] .) "had the whole body of the Jewish nation been converted to Christianity, men would certainly have thought, they had been forged by Christians, and have looked upon them, with the prophecies of the Sybils, as made many years after the events they pretend to foretel." And, to add no more here, the preservation of the Jews, as a distinct people, evidently leaves room for the accomplishment of those Old and New Testament promises [172] , which relate to their national conversion and restoration; whereas that would be impossible in itself, or, at least, be impossible to be known, if they were promiscuously blended with other people. On the whole, it is such a scene in the conduct of Providence, as I am well assured cannot be paralleled in the history of any other nation

on earth, and affords a most obvious and important argument in favour of the Gospel. Thus has Christianity been farther confirmed, since its first publication, by what God has done to establish it. It only remains that we consider, (2.) What confirmation it receives, "from the methods which its enemies have taken to destroy it." And these have generally been, either persecution, or falsehood, or cavilling at some particulars in the revelation, without entering into the grand argument on which it is built, and fairly debating what is offered in its defence. Now, who would not think the better of a cause for being thus attacked? At first, you know, that the professors, and especially the preachers, of the Gospel were severely persecuted. In every city, bonds and imprisonments awaited them [173]. As soon as ever the apostles began to preach Jesus and his resurrection, the Jewish rulers laid hold on them; and, having confined, and scourged them, strictly prohibited their speaking any more in that name [174]. A little while after, Stephen was murdered [175]; and afterwards James [176], and some other of the apostles. Now, certainly, such a conduct did evidently shew a consciousness, that they were not able to answer the apostles, and to support their own cause by the fair methods of reason and argument; to which, so far as the history informs us, they made no pretence; but attempted to bear them down by dint of authority, and to silence them by brutal force. The time would fail me, should I attempt particularly to shew, how these unrighteous methods were pursued in succeeding ages and distant countries. The savage cruelties of Nero to these innocent and holy men were such as raised the pity even of their enemies [177]: yet this was one of the least extensive and destructive of the ten general persecutions, which arose in the Roman empire, besides several others in the neighbouring countries, of which ecclesiastical history informs us. These early enemies of the Gospel added falsehood and slanders to their inhumanities. They endeavoured to murder the reputations of the Christians as well as their persons, and were not ashamed [to represent them as haters of the whole human species [178], for no imaginable reason, but because they would not associate themselves in their idolatrous worship, but, with regard to charity and truth, were strongly bearing their testimony against it [179]:] nay, they charged them with human sacrifices, incest, idolatry, and all the crimes for which themselves and their foolish gods were indeed justly detestable; but from which the Christians knew how to vindicate themselves, highly to their own honour, and to the everlasting reproach of these malignant and pestilent accusers: and they have not failed to do it in many noble apologies, which, through the divine Providence, are transmitted to us, and are, incomparably, the most valuable of any ancient uninspired writings. Such were the infamous and scandalous methods by which the Gospel was opposed in the earliest ages of the church; and I cannot forbear adding, "that the measures more lately taken to subvert it, especially amongst ourselves, seem to me rather to reflect a glory upon it." Its unhappy enemies have been told again and again, that we put the proof of it on plain fact. They themselves do not and cannot deny, that it prevailed early in the world, as we have shewn at large. There must have been some man, or body of men, who first introduced it: they generally confess that Christ and his apostles were the persons; and these apostles (on whose testimony what we know of Christ chiefly depends) must have been enthusiasts or impostors, if their testimony was false. Now, which of these schemes will the unbeliever take? It seems, that the deists of the present age fix on neither, as being secretly conscious they can support neither, but they content themselves with cavilling at some circumstances attending the revelation, without daring to encounter its grand evidence; i. e. they have been laboriously attempting to prove it "to be improbable, or absurd, to suppose that to have been, which nevertheless plainly appears to have been, fact." One most weakly and sophistically

pretends to prove, in defiance of the common sense of mankind, that the light of nature is a perfect rule, and, therefore, that all revelation is needless, and indeed impossible. Another disguises the miracles of Christ by false and foolish representations of them, and then sets himself to ridicule them as idle tales. And a third takes a great deal of fruitless pains to shew, that some prophecies referred to in the New Testament are capable of another sense, different from that in which the apostles have taken them. These things have been set in a very artful and fallacious light by persons, whose names will be, perhaps, transmitted to posterity, with the infamous glory of having been leaders in the cause of infidelity: but not a man of them undertakes directly to answer, what has been said to ascertain the grand fact. Nay, they generally take no more notice of the positive evidence, by which it is even demonstrated, than if they had never heard it proposed; though they cavil at incidental passages in those books, in which it is most clearly stated. And as for what they have urged, though perhaps some, who were before weary of Christianity, may have taken occasion from their writings to reject it; and others, for want of consulting the answers to them, may have been unwarily ensnared; yet the examination of these points has been greatly to the honour and vindication of the truth, which seems, on this occasion, to have been set in a clearer and stronger light than ever, at least in these later ages. The cause of Christianity has greatly gained by debate, and the Gospel comes like fine gold out of the furnace, which, the more it is tried, the more it is approved. I own, the defenders of the Gospel have appeared with very different degrees of ability for the work; nor could it be otherwise, amongst such numbers of them; but, on the whole, though the patrons of infidelity have been masters of some wit, humour, and address, as well as of a moderate share of learning, and generally much more than a moderate share of assurance; yet, so great is the force of truth, that (unless we may except those writers, who have unhappily called for the aid of the civil magistrate in the controversy) I cannot recollect, that I have seen any defence of the Gospel, which has not, on the whole, been sufficient to establish it, notwithstanding all the sophistical arguments of its most subtile antagonists.[This is an observation, which is continually gaining new strength as new assaults are made upon the Gospel. And I cannot forbear saying, that, as if it were by a kind of judicial infatuation, some, who have distinguished themselves in the wretched cause of infidelity, have been permitted to fall into such gross misrepresentations, such senseless inconsistencies, and such palpable falsehoods [180] , and, in a word, into such a various and malignant superfluity of naughtiness; that, to a wise and pious mind, they must appear like those venomous creatures, which are said to carry an antidote in their bowels against their own poison. A virtuous and well-bred deist must turn away from some modern pieces of this kind with scorn and abhorrence: and a Christian might almost be tempted to wish, that the books, with all their scandals about them, might be transmitted to posterity, lest when they come to live, like the writings of some of the ancient heathens, only in those of their learned and pious answerers, it should hardly be credited, that ever the enemies of the Gospel, in such an enlightened age, should be capable of so much impiety and folly.]Thus I have given you a brief view of the chief arguments in proof of Christianity; and the sum of the whole is this:The Gospel is probable in theory; as, considering the nature of God and the circumstances of mankind, there was reason to hope a revelation might be given; and, if any were given, we should naturally apprehend its internal evidence would be such as that of the Gospel is, and its external such as it is said to be. But it is also true in fact; for, Christianity was early professed, as it was first introduced by Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and doctrines were published by his immediate attendants; whose books are preserved still in their original language, and, in the main, are

faithfully translated into our own: so that the books of the New Testament now in your hands may be depended upon, as written by the persons whose names they bear. And, admitting this, the truth of the Gospel follows by a train of very easy consequences; for, the authors certainly knew the truth of the facts they relate; and, considering what appears of their character and circumstances, we can never believe they would have attempted to deceive us; or, if they had, they could not have gained credit in the world: yet they did gain it in a remarkable manner; therefore, the facts they attested are true. And the truth of the Gospel evidently follows from the certainty of those facts, and is much confirmed by what has happened in the world since the first publication of it. I shall conclude what I have to say on this subject, with a few words by way of reflection.¹ Let us gratefully acknowledge the divine goodness, in favouring us with so excellent a revelation, and confirming it to us by such an ample evidence. We should be daily adoring the God of nature, for lighting up the sun, that glorious, though imperfect, image of his own unapproachable lustre; and appointing it to gild the earth with its various rays, to cheer us with its benign influences, and to guide and direct us in our journeys and our labours. But how incomparably more valuable is that day-spring from on high which has visited us, that sun of righteousness, which is risen upon us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace [181] ? O Christians, (for, I now address myself to you, whose eyes are so happy as indeed to see and your ears as to hear [182]),) what reason have you for daily and hourly praise! when your minds are delighted with contemplating the riches of Gospel-grace, when you view with wonder and joy the harmonious contrivance of our redemption, when you feel the burden of your guilt removed, the freedom of your address to the throne of grace encouraged, and see the prospect of a fair inheritance of eternal glory opening upon you; then, in the pleasing transport of your souls, borrow the joyful anthem of the Psalmist, and say, with the humblest gratitude and self-resignation, God is the Lord, who hath given us light! bind the sacrifice with cords, even to the horns of the altar [183] . Adore God, who first commanded the light to shine out of darkness, that, by the discoveries of his word and the operations of his Spirit, he has shined in your hearts, to give you the knowledge of his glory, as reflected from the face of his Son [184] . Let us all adore him, that this revelation hath reached us, who live in an age and country so distant from that in which it first appeared; while there are, to this day, not only dark corners but regions of the earth, which are full of the habitations of idolatry and cruelty [185] . Let me here particularly address myself to those, whose education and circumstances of life have given them opportunities of a fuller inquiry into the state of those ancient or modern nations, that have been left merely to the light of unassisted reason; even to you, sirs, who are acquainted with the history of their gods, the rites of their priests, the tales, and even the hymns, of their poets, (those beautiful trifles;) nay, I will add, the reasonings of their sagest philosophers, all the precarious and all the erroneous things they have said, where religion and immortality are concerned [186] . I have sometimes thought, that God gave to some of the most celebrated pagan writers that uncommon share of genius and eloquence, that they might, as it were, by their art, embalm the monsters of antiquity: that so succeeding ages might see, in a more affecting view than we could otherwise have done, how weak the human mind is in its best estate, and the need which the greatest as well as the meanest of mankind have of being taught by a revelation from above. Permit me to remind you, that while you are daily conversing with such monuments as these; (as I know some of you are,) and are also surveying the evidences of Christianity, in a larger and more distinct view, are under peculiar obligations to be very thankful for the Gospel yourselves, as well as to companionate the

case of those, to whom it has never been offered, or by whom it is slighted. And this leads me to another reflection;² What reason have we to pity those, who reject this glorious Gospel, even when they have opportunities of inquiring into its clearest evidences? Such, undoubtedly, there are in our own age and nation; and surely we should sometimes bestow a compassionate thought upon them, and lift up an humble prayer for them; if God, peradventure, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth, that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are now led captive by him at his pleasure [187] . We should pity heathens and Mahometans, under their darkness and errors: but how much more deplorable is the case of these, who, though they dwell in Emmanuel's land, and in the valley of vision, turn it into the valley of the shadow of death, by closing their eyes against so bright a lustre, and stopping their ears against the voice of the charmer [188] ? They are, indeed, in their own conceit, the only people, and wisdom will die with them [189] ; so that, to be sure, they will scorn our pity: but who can forbear it? Is there a more melancholy thought than this, that the Son of God should have done so much to introduce and establish the Gospel, and his Spirit so much to perpetuate and increase its evidence, and that, after all, it should be contemptuously despised, even by creatures who are perishing without it? That the blessed Jesus, instead of being received with open arms as the great deliverer, should either be treated as an empty name, or, if acknowledged to be a real person, should then be represented as a visionary enthusiast or a wicked impostor? for, there is no other alternative. And this, not only (though, I believe, most frequently) by men of profligate and abandoned lives, but sometimes by persons of external morality and decency, of great humanity and sweetness of temper, (for, such I know are to be found amongst them,) as well as men of wit and genius, of politeness and learning, of human prudence and experience in affairs. I may also add, that it is the case of some, who were the children of pious parents, who were trained up in religious exercises, who once discovered serious impressions, and gave very encouraging hopes. Alas, whither are they fallen! and whither, have we reason to fear, they will at length fall! how shall we shelter those, that were once our brethren, that are, perhaps, still our friends, from the awful sentence, which the Gospel denounces against all that reject, without any exception? As to the wretches, that add insult and derision to their infidelity, I tremble to think of that load of guilt which they are bringing on themselves, and how near they approach to the unpardonable sin, if they have not already committed it. For the rest, who behave in a more modest and sober manner, it will, no doubt, be a very difficult talk to convince them; and so much the rather, as some of them, by too easy, a transition, have renounced many of the most important principles of natural religion, nay, I might add, even the whole of it, together with the Christian revelation. But the influences of divine grace are almighty; let us recommend them to these, and omit no other proper method, either of recovering those who are already seduced, or at least of securing those who are not yet infected, but may be (as most of the youth are, especially in the most populous places) in imminent danger of the contagion. To this end let me add,³ How reasonable is it, that Christians should form a familiar acquaintance with the great evidences of our own common faith! It is what we so apparently owe to the honour of God, to the interest of Christ, to the peace of our own souls, and the edification of others, that I hope I need not urge it at large; especially considering what was said in the introduction to these discourses. In consequence of all, let it be your care to make the evidences of Christianity the subject of your serious reflections and of your frequent converse: especially, study your Bibles, where there are such marks of truth and divinity to be found, that, I believe, few that have familiarly known them, and have had a relish for them, were ever brought to

make shipwreck of the faith as it is in Jesus. Above all, let it be your care to as on the rules which are here laid down; and, then, you will find your faith growing in a happy proportion, and will experience the truth of our Saviour's declaration, that, if any man will resolutely and faithfully do his will, he shall know of the Christian doctrine whether it be of God [190] . I verily believe, it is the purity of its precepts which lies at the bottom of most men's opposition to it; or a natural pride of heart, which gives them an aversion to so humbling a scheme; or a fond affectation of seeming wiser than others, in rejecting what most of their neighbours do at least profess to believe. When these unhappy prejudices and conceptions are, by divine grace, conquered and rooted out, the evidence of truth will daily appear with an increasing lustre; as the light of the sun does, to an eye recovering from a film, with which it had been overgrown, and which before had veiled it with midnight in the midst of noon. Once more, 4. How solicitous should we be to embrace and obey that Gospel, which comes attended with such abundant evidences! I may undoubtedly address myself to most of you, my friends, and say, as Paul did to king Agrippa, Believest thou the prophets [191] ? and I may add, the evangelists and the apostles? Yes, I know that you believe them; yet, let me entreat and charge you not to rest here, but attentively to examine how far your hearts are affected and your lives regulated by such a belief. The Christian revelation is a practical thing; and it is heard, it is believed, it is professed, and even defended, in vain, if it be not obeyed. Therefore, do we so frequently read of obeying the truth, and obeying the Gospel, as a matter of so great importance [192] . In this Gospel, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men; but it is revealed with redoubled terror against that audacious sinner, who holds the truth in unrighteousness [193] . In this Gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ is exalted, both as a Prince and a Saviour [194] ; and it is not with impunity that the impenitent rebel can reject his yoke and trample on his blood; for, if he, that despised Moses's law, died without mercy, of how much sorer punishment than even a capital execution must they be thought worthy, who have poured contempt on such a sovereign and on such a Redeemer [195] ? Oh let it be most secretly and frequently recollected, that this Gospel is the touch-stone, by which you are another day to be tried; the balance, in which an impartial Judge will weigh you; and must, on the whole, prove your everlasting triumph or your everlasting torment. The blessed God did not introduce it with such solemn notice, such high expectation, such pompous miracles, such awful sanctions, that men might reject or dishonour it at pleasure; but will certainly be found, to the greatest and meanest, of those that hear it, a favour of life unto life or a favour of death unto death [196] . Let it therefore be your immediate care, to inquire which of there it is like to prove to your souls; since it is so far from being a vain thing, that it is really your very life [197] . It has hitherto been despised, and that blessed Redeemer, in whom it so apparently centres, has been neglected; remember, that all, which has been said in confirmation of its truth, does but in effect prove that the hand-writing of God himself is set to the sentence of your eternal condemnation. Oh, therefore, allow not yourselves a moment's rest, till you have with humble submission applied to his throne, while yet there is hope that it may be reversed. And as for you, my brethren, who have received Christ Jesus the Lord, be exhorted to walk in him [198] ; since it is the design of his Gospel to teach us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly [199] ; and this, not only as you have so comfortable an assurance, that your labour shall not be in vain in the Lord [200] , but as it will be, on the whole, the most effectual method you can take in your respective stations to promote the Gospel. If you indeed honour it and love it, and desire it may be propagated in the world, let it be your care, not only to defend it by your tongues, but to

adorn it by your lives: and, in the words of that great champion in this sacred cause, be blameless and harmless, the children of God without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, shining amongst them as lights in the world, and so holding forth the word of life [201] ; and perhaps it may serve not only to entertain their eyes with wonder and glory, but to guide their feet into the way of peace, and may engage them also to join with you in glorifying your Father which is in heaven [202] . Amen.THE END.Printed by H. L. Galabin, Ingram-Court, London.

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