

L E T T E R II.

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G R O U N D S  
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F A I T H.

## L E T T E R    I I .

MY DEAR SIR,

**I** Embrace the earliest opportunity to express my grateful acknowledgments of your last favor, and to fulfil my own promise, of which you remind me.

Before I speak of the **GROUNDS** of faith, permit me just to mention the several sources of our ideas in general. Sensation is the original spring from whence ideas flow. Thus, for instance, we have ideas of various colors communicated to the mind, through the medium of the eye, of sounds by the ear, and so on. The ideas we receive by means of our senses, may be combined and multiplied

multiplied by reflection, which is therefore a second source of ideas. But the mind is not omnipotent. It cannot create. It must have materials to work upon, or it can do nothing. It must be furnished with matter before it can modify it. It must be stored with some first principles, from which, by the exercise of reason, it may infer others. Secondary ideas can have no existence without primary ideas to give them birth.

It seems proper also to observe, that as we move in a small sphere, as our observation is necessarily circumscribed by narrow bounds, few things comparatively can fall within the compass of our senses, and therefore we are indebted to the testimony

of others for a considerable part of our stock of ideas.

But as all testimony is not credited, it is necessary to inquire, why it is we believe some things that we hear or read, and disbelieve others? The only answer I can give is this: because, in the first case, there appears to us sufficient evidence of the truth, but not in the latter. Faith must be built upon evidence. Without evidence there can be no faith. Evidence is the basis, faith is the superstructure. Evidence is the fountain, faith is the stream. Evidence is the root, faith is the branch. Evidence is the parent, faith is the offspring. These things are certainly distinguishable, at least in my opinion. It requires no great degree

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of penetration to discern the difference between a foundation, and that which stands on it. For instance, that positive declaration of Jesus Christ, \* *Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you,* is the ground of my encouragement in going to the throne of grace. But you will not, on this account, confound those animating words of the adorable Redeemer, with the encouragement I experience in my mind. So the atonement of Christ is the ground of my hope of future happiness, but not my hope itself. Hope exists in the mind. Hope is the expectation of future good, founded upon the atonement, which, I believe, upon the testimony of scripture, Christ made  
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\* Matt. vii. 7.

to divine justice on the cross, above seventeen hundred years ago. Again, the candle, by the light of which I now write, is supported by the candlestick in which it stands: but this does not destroy the necessary distinction between the candle and the candlestick. So the candlestick stands upon the table, but the table is not therefore a part of the candlestick. In like manner there must be evidence for faith to rest on, but this is no part of faith itself. I believe that the dead will arise, because God hath asserted it; but his assertion is not my faith. The one is the cause, the other the effect; and therefore ought not to be confounded.

The proper object of faith is a proposition, be it of what kind it may;

16. L E T T E R II.

may; this does not alter the nature of faith.

Some propositions are self-evident; others only probable; some barely possible; others evidently absurd.

Self-evident propositions we believe, whoever may assert them. As they carry their own evidence with them, no additional evidence is required. Their internal evidence supercedes the necessity of external. Indulge me while I exemplify my meaning. If a person, noted for his falsehood, or his ignorance, were to assert, that three angles make a triangle, that the whole is greater than a part, that two and two make four, that a circle is not a triangle, nor a triangle a square, we should instantly

L E T T E R II. 17

ly believe what he says if we heard and understood him; not because *he* asserts these things, but because his assertions carry demonstration with them.

Propositions that are only probable, require external evidence to produce faith. Evidence of this kind arises generally and principally from the wisdom and integrity of our author. It is not self-evident that there were such men as Lycurgus, the famous Spartan law-giver; Cyrus, who liberated the captives of Judah; Alexander the Great, who was a mighty conqueror; Archimedes, the celebrated mathematician; Julius Cæsar, who conquered Rome; and many others that might be mentioned; therefore, however *probable*

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it may appear, as bare probability is not a sufficient ground for faith, some external evidence is necessary. That is *probable* which is agreeable to the general course of events. The greater the probability, the less external evidence is required.

Some propositions are not *probable*, but barely *possible*; and in order to credit such the strongest evidence is requisite. It is *possible* for the God of nature, whose power is unbounded, to suspend the operation of those stated laws by which he governs the world, or to reverse them at his pleasure. At the command of the Universal Sovereign the planets may stand still, the earth cease to roll, and the deep waters of the majestic sea divide. These, and ten thousand  
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other phenomena, Omnipotence can easily accomplish. Miracles may be performed; but they cannot be believed without the best authority. Evidence in this case must be very strong.

Some propositions are evidently absurd, and such we cannot credit on any authority. If I hear a man say, that four is a greater number than six, that an octagon is a circle, that a consecrated wafer is the identical body of Christ, that the same body is in two different places at the same time . . . . I should not believe him, but suppose either that he understood not what he said, had some mystical meaning, designed to try my credulity, or wished to impose upon my ignorance.

Faith is not an act of the will, but of the understanding. Faith arises from the prevalence of evidence. When evidence darts its irresistible light into the mind, it is impossible to withhold our assent; and when no evidence strikes the mind, it is impossible to believe. We cannot disbelieve many reports; if we would, the evidence of their truth is so powerful as to command our assent. Other truths we may wish to believe, but cannot for want of evidence. . . . The disconsolate widow of the late Captain PIERCE would have been happy could she have disbelieved the melancholy intelligence of the loss of the HALSEWELL. But in vain did nature struggle . . . . in vain did her tender feelings strive . . . . in vain her attachment to her now lost

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partner . . . . in vain her affection to her blooming daughters, the devoted victims to instant death . . . . in vain were all the fondest wishes of her heart . . . . In opposition to the warmest desires with which her bosom heaved, she felt the power of irresistible truth. With no more success could she resist the energy of evidence than the shipwrecked mariners the tempestuous winds and roaring billows. Every heart, not steeled against the tender feelings of humanity, must have rejoiced if news so affecting had proved without foundation.

Faith is no more at the command of our will than are any of our senses. If I open my eyes I must see what presents itself, not what I may wish

to behold. If I walk into the fields in a hard frost, when the earth is covered with snow; I shall not see nature robed in her gayest dress, the fields decked with flowers of variegated beauties, and the meadows cloathed with the richest verdure, however delectable such a sight would appear. So it is with faith; I cannot believe what I please, but what appears to me to be true.

In some cases, when a fact is asserted, it may be proper to make these three inquiries. First, is it *possible*? If indeed it should appear, upon examination, to be impossible, all other inquiries would be vain. But many things are *possible* that are not *probable*; is it therefore, in the second place, *probable*? If, upon investigation, it be found *improbable*,

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we may proceed no farther. But if there appear strong *probability*, as many things are *probable* that are not *true*, we should go on to inquire, thirdly, if there be sufficient evidence to amount to *certainty*.

It is proper to consider the *kind* of evidence we want, as well as the *degree*. To expect the evidence of *sense* in matters of pure *faith*, would be absurd to the last degree. If I were to say, I will not believe the Halfewell is lost, because I did not see her sink, I should prove myself an hardened infidel indeed! I might as well assert there is no such country as America, because I was never there.

There are, it is true, many things that we receive upon the testimony

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of others, that will admit of demonstration. I may believe the truth of a problem in Euclid, upon the testimony of an honest man who understands mathematics, without entering into the ratio of it myself. He affirms that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. I have an idea of an angle, a right angle, and a triangle: I know what is meant by the whole proposition; but I do not *see* how it can be. In this case, it may be, I should say to my friend, ‘ Really, Sir, I do not see how it can be, but as you say it is so, I take your word. I believe upon your authority, Sir, what I cannot see with my eyes.’ *Faith is the evidence of things not SEEN\** If my friend should then demonstrate

\* Heb. xi. 1.

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the problem to me mathematically, it would become an object of sight, and cease to be an object of faith. The same observation might be made respecting a variety of truths in the several branches of experimental philosophy.

But many truths cannot be thus demonstrated, and it would be unreasonable to demand what, in the nature of things, cannot be given.

Most of the propositions that we believe will admit only of moral evidence, and it would be absurd to require physical, mathematical, or any kind of evidence foreign to the subject.

If evidence of the kind, that is  
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26    L E T T E R    I I.

suitcd to the subject, be good, it is all that the most incredulous can reasonably require. In most worldly concerns men act upon testimony, when demonstration cannot be obtained.

In examining the evidence of a fact, we may consider the character of those who assert it, by inquiring particularly into their wisdom and integrity. Is it probable that they are deceived themselves? are they men of understanding? are they competent judges of the subject upon which they speak? do they go upon report only, or their own knowledge? are they of a credulous disposition, and ready to give credit to old wives fables? is it probable that they design to deceive others? do they agree in their evidence? do the circumstances

L E T T E R    I I.    27

circumstances of time, place, &c. harmonize? can they have any interest in imposing on others? are they influenced by envy, hatred, covetousness, pride, ambition, or any evil passion, to circulate falsehood? many more questions of this nature might be proposed. And if you receive satisfactory answers, as to their understanding and integrity, their evidence is good.

Where there is no evidence, there can be no faith. Where evidence, on the opposite sides, is equal, the mind is kept in a state of suspense. Where the evidence on one side is stronger than on the other, the mind is proportionably swayed. Where the evidence is full, faith is strong.

It is proper, my dear friend, to observe,

28 LETTER II.

serve, that I do not speak of *actual* evidence, but evidence as it *strikes* the mind. For if the degrees of assent, so to speak, were proportioned to real evidence, men in general would believe alike; which, we evidently perceive, they do not. What is evidence to one is not to another. There may be evidence in fact, where none strikes the mind. On the contrary, we may think there is evidence where there is none. Different *ages, dispositions, abilities, and circumstances*, are to be considered.

Consider *ages*: a young person, just entering on the busy theatre of human life, flushed with expectation, and warmed by benevolence, is ready to believe every person sincere who professes friendship; but cautious

LETTER II. 29

cautious is that person who is more acquainted with the ways of men, whom bitter experience has taught that there may be a great profession of attachment where none is felt; and that the countenance may wear an affected smile of complaisance where the heart is full of malevolence. The former believes a bare declaration; the latter requires something more.

Consider *dispositions*: some are naturally credulous, others slow of belief. Instances of the truth of this are too numerous to require proof or illustration.

Consider *abilities*: a person of weak intellects is liable to be imposed on by sophistical reasoning; but one of more penetration sees through

30 L E T T E R II.

through the delusive garb of falsehood. He who sees only one side of a subject may believe what is false; which another detects who takes a comprehensive view.

Consider *circumstances*: an honest and sensible inhabitant of the country is more likely than a citizen to believe the plausible tale of a London sharper. One who lives between the tropics would require more evidence to believe that the river Thames froze last winter, than an inhabitant of Scotland. A Dutch ambassador, I have read, entertained the king of Siam, at his request, with an account of the peculiarities of Holland; and among other things told his Majesty that the water, in cold weather, would be sometimes  
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L E T T E R II. 31

so hard as to support men, or bear the weight of an elephant. To whom the king replied, 'Hitherto I have believed the strange things you told me, because I looked upon you as a sober fair man; but now I am sure you say what is false.'

I make the same apology for this long letter, which Monsieur Paschal once made, 'I have not time to write a shorter.'

Yours, &c.

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