

THE
“GRAVE QUESTION” CONSIDERED :

BEING A

REPLY TO MR. J. COX ;

SHEWING THAT

INDISCRIMINATE COMMANDS

TO

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES,

AND

INDISCRIMINATE INVITATIONS

TO

SPIRITUAL PROVISIONS,

ARE

Not Authorized by the Word of God.

BY ISRAEL ATKINSON.

“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him :”
JOHN vi. 44.

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God : for they
are foolishness unto him ; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually
discerned :” 1 COR. ii. 14.

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P R E F A C E.

THIS little book is intentionally controversial; and perhaps this announcement may be deemed a sufficient reason, with some, that they should not read it. This reason may be alleged by them from the best motives, and with the best intentions, but in itself it is weak and bad, and pregnant with evil consequences. Truth is valuable. "Buy the truth and sell it not." Part with it under no considerations. Contend earnestly for it against all contrary considerations. Truth is even more valuable than peace. It is for the truth's sake only that I have been induced to enter into the field of controversy. Truth is my friend. It was assailed,—I have defended it. Its beauty was defaced,—I have wiped away the blot. Its analogy was tacitly denied,—I have affirmed its symmetry. If controversy for the truth's sake is censurable, either error is harmless or truth worthless. I am not the aggressor, but the defendant. The reason of my appearing before the public in this character is simple.—

Mr. Cox, of Woolwich, published some little time ago, "A GRAVE QUESTION FOR ALL PREACHERS OF THE GOSPEL;" namely, "*How does God address the unconverted in his holy Word?*" Having cited six portions of Scripture, he requires three things to be observed respecting each of those Scriptures, the two principle of which are, that *God commands sinners to seek him, to return to him, to believe, to be converted, &c., and that sinners are invited to participate in eternal blessings.* Upon which he asks, "Can either of the above three positions be *honestly* denied?" &c., &c. Believing Mr. C.'s views to be thoroughly erroneous, and highly mischievous, and his manner of remark to my apprehension bearing the character of insulting defiance, I have presumed to oppose. He who is wholly opposed to controversy must be opposed to the gospel, for that is a continued and violent aggression upon every connatural notion of the fallen human mind. It is indeed lamentable to find controversy among ministers, but the occasion served for it by some of them departing from the truth, and insultingly provoking it, is more lamentable than the thing itself. Besides, it ought to be remembered that official stations are important, because influential. If a Christian man errs it is bad, but if a minister errs it is worse; the former being unofficial is comparatively uninfluential, but none can tell the influence of the latter.

The error against which I have struck is a discretionary authority assumed by ministers, not only beyond, but contrary to given directions. It is not only an addition to the Word of God, and therefore a

reflection upon its sufficiency, but it is contrary thereto, and therefore a direct insult against its divine Author. By it the self-consistency of the Scriptures is tacitly admitted, and their authority, therefore, and use completely invalidated. If the Scriptures be self-inconsistent all appeal to them is absolutely vain. They can be no standard, no test, no rule; their evidence cannot be received, and by them no truth can be established, no error refuted. Wisdom says, "They are all plain to him that understandeth;" they agree each to each as one flat surface does to another, to him that *compares spiritual things with spiritual*. Were they not pre-eminently possessed of this quality, their authority would be null, and their utility void. No man can be obliged to regard two opposite testimonies, nor can he be edified or comforted by them. A man can as soon serve God and mammon as believe two contrarious predicates of one subject.

Whoever may read this little book, supposing them to believe the Scriptures, and to venerate their Author, I entreat them to turn scrupulously to the passages quoted, as they read, for confirmation of the observations and arguments used and employed; and if they are seeking for the truth on this subject, and are within the reach of evidence, it is hoped they will rise from reading not only convinced, but confirmed.

If my opponent really believes his new views are comprehended in the faith once delivered to the saints, he ought to contend for them. Should he do so, and give something more than his own dogma for doctrine, assertion for argument, and assumption for proof, I promise (D. V.) to give attention, and hope to be edified. But if he is still determined to intrench himself by such fortifications as the tacit disavowal of the use of human reason, and the implicit admission of the self-inconsistency of the Scriptures, he will necessarily be invincible by evidence, and may say almost anything without contradiction. He will be out of the reach of evidence and cannot be dealt with by it. But there is one way left. I am forced to it by the necessity of the case for the truth's sake against my inclinations. *I challenge the author to prove the Scriptures irreconcilable, and defy him to maintain his positions otherwise than by assuming the Word of God to be self-contradictory, and by false and unphilological modes of interpretation.*

*Melbourne Place, Sandy Hill, Woolwich,
Feb. 15, 1850.*

THE "GRAVE QUESTION"

CONSIDERED.

A GRAVE question ought to be gravely considered, and all remarks upon it ought to be gravely delivered. Every question relating to the will of God, to the work of Christ, to the operations of the Holy Ghost, and to the documents inspired by the Holy Ghost, must needs be grave. He who attempts to explain any such question, ought, at least, to be convinced of the importance of his task. He should skilfully and rightly divide the word of truth—deeply regard the interests involved—strictly adhere to the standard, and devoutly venerate the analogy of truth. He should not bear false witness, nor draw false conclusions. He should endeavour to learn by his considerations, and be humbly subject to just convictions. He should be willing to forego, whatever he cannot retain, consistent with truth, and the honour of the Most High.

Truth is ever analogous and self-consistent. All its parts are agreeable to its whole. It never falsifies itself, and is unfalsifiable. God is true. His word is truth—analogous, self-consistent, beautiful truth. It challenges the closest inspection, courts the keenest scrutiny, and the more fully and clearly it is seen, the more admirable it appears, in all the purposes it reveals, the promises it contains, the doctrines it teaches, and the precepts it enjoins; and it presents as a whole, one incomparable body of "*sound speech, which cannot be condemned.*"

Some scripture truths are self-evident, some are doctrinal, and some positive; but the two latter are always, and altogether agreeable to the former. This fact should be carefully regarded, and rigorously maintained by all teachers in their ministrations. Slighting this, not a few have set scripture against scripture, one testament against the other, and both against God! They have doctrinally, by false conclusions, broken the *proportion of faith*; and then, tacitly declared, there is no such thing. They have frequently applied scriptures in an unqualified sense, *generally*, which can only bear to be so applied, to a *particular person or people*; and so have proved themselves workmen, which have need to be ashamed, *not* rightly dividing the word of truth.

The *grave question for all preachers of the gospel* is, "How does God address unconverted sinners in his holy Word?" A grave question truly; but from subsequent remarks made, it appears, it was not proposed for instruction. Without attending to the varied form and manner wherein God addresses the unconverted, the following conclusions are safe. Never contrary to himself. Never contrary to the nature of things. His truth forbids the former, his wisdom the latter.

First. God never addresses the unconverted in a manner contrary to himself. And,

1. God never addresses those unconverted, whom he foreordained to the condemnation of denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, invitingly, to be justified by the blood of Christ, and to be saved from wrath through him: Jude 4; Matt. xxi. 37—45; and xxiii. 32, 33; and compare Matt. x. 14, with Acts xiii. 51.

2. It is said of some of the unconverted, "Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, "He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them:" John xii. 39, 40.

3. The mist of darkness, and the blackness of darkness is reserved for ever to some of the unconverted: 2 Pet. ii. 17; Jude 13. Are these invited to participate in eternal blessings? Is not this impossible to God? If this be admitted, either there is no stability in his appointments, or no sincerity in his invitations; both which are alike impossible to the God of truth. And as, whatever he has appointed, is in righteousness, and abideth for ever, either his justice must quit its rights, and be mutable, or his invitations are no better than tantalizations! The judicial reservation of the mist of darkness for ever, and a merciful invitation to life everlasting, are contraries, impossible to God, in respect of one and the same individual. What God appoints judicially, he never annuls in sovereignty; nor does he ever use language from which such confusion can be deduced.

4. Mr. Cox seems to admit the doctrine of election in his book; but it is merely in name, for the consequences are denied. But the church are elect, personally, and unconditionally, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father: 1 Pet. i. 2. They are chosen in Christ: Eph. i. 4. But election supposes non-election. Has God made any saving provision, or given any saving promise in Christ, or in any other, for and to the non-elect? If not, how can he be said to invite those to a *participation of eternal blessings*, for whom he has made no provision, and to whom he has made no promise? Does the faithful and true God invite to substance, and cheat with semblance? Is there dissimulation in either God or his Word? Or, are the blessings of salvation to be participated without election? If these things are too glaring and shocking to be admitted, it appears plain, that to invite indiscriminately, is contrary to God—is a mere

human invention—a doctrinal presumption, at direct variance with a self-evident truth; and therefore, however pleasing to the invited, or profitable to the inviter, it should be dealt with as a noxious innovation. When Paul and Barnabas preached at Antioch, they turned from the contradicting and blaspheming Jews, to the Gentiles; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed: Acts xiii. 45—48. *But we do not find here one word of general invitation*, though there was full scope for it, had the apostles been thus commissioned! To preach the gospel to every creature is a divine command; but to invite every creature to participate in eternal blessings, is contrary to God, and inimical to the creature, because delusive, seeing the elect only obtain them: Rom. xi. 7.

5. Mr. Cox professes in his book, to be a firm believer in the doctrines of a free grace salvation, wrought out by Jesus, as the Surety of his people. We sometimes hear of *covering a retreat*. What is the form without the reality—the name without the nature—the shell without the kernel? However, Jesus is the Surety of his people. The suretyship of Christ extends to all the chosen seed. With these persons, this legal union and engagement is exemplified. He became responsible for their honorable acquittal and justification, their final perseverance and endless happiness. He involved his honor in his undertaking, his work is perfect, his sacrifice is satisfactory, he is accepted and enthroned in glory, and he says to his friends, "Because I live, ye shall live also." But Jesus Christ was not responsible for everybody, and did not die for everybody. The Surety was responsible for his friends, and the Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep: John x. 15. Remission of sins is impossible without the blood shedding of the divine Surety; but the blood of Christ was shed for his people: Luke xxii. 20; therefore his people only can be invited, prudently and rightly, to the blessings arising from thence. If the suretyship of Christ is limited, and the meritorious cause of all saving blessings, it is utterly incompatible with general invitations. The Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep, in distinction from the goats; does God invite the goats, as goats, to participate in the blessings procured only for the sheep? Rather, I suppose, the goats are invited or commanded to put off their goatly propensities and natures, and become sheep; or to perform an act of self-metamorphosis, analogous to a spiritual creation by the Holy Ghost! Did Mr. Cox ever see this done? Ridiculous! Universal invitations to a participation of eternal blessings, are contrary to the suretyship of Christ, a misrepresentation of God, and delusive to the creature.

6. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed the *church* with all spiritual blessings; has chosen, and predestinated *them* unto the adoption of children by Christ; in Christ *they* have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins; Christ is made of God unto *them* wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctifica-

tion, and redemption; and Christ was constituted the "Head of the church, and he is the Saviour of the *body*:" Eph. v. 23. He laid down his life for the *sheep*, and prayed for his *disciples*. He loved the *church*, and gave himself for *it*. The *foreknown* are predestinated, the *predestinated* are called, the *called* are justified, and the *justified* are glorified: Rom. viii. 29, 30. General invitations are an attempted breach in God's order, and an addition to God's Word! No doctrinal statement can be true which is contrary to self-evident truth: but it is a self-evident truth that God is self-consistent, in his saving intentions, and merciful invitations; while it is an easily-proved fact that his saving intentions are limited; therefore universal invitations in his name, to a saving participation of eternal blessings, are untrue, and deceptive. This argument is an *honest denial*, and, until it be disproved, I shall esteem it a *solid refutation* of the general theory. How shocking it is to deceive a sinner on the brink of eternity!

Second. God never addresses sinners in a manner contrary to the nature of things, either by an arbitrary command, or a merciful invitation. His reasonableness and goodness forbid the former, his wisdom the latter. An invitation supposes a mutual acceptableness between the inviter, and the invited; and a suitableness between the invited, and that to which the invitation relates. Invitations, therefore, are not sincerely given, where there is a rooted enmity between the parties: it is contrary to the nature of things. But, let it be remarked,

1. Sinners, as such, are the enemies of God. They are not only *without* God, but against him. *Actually*, sin is a transgression of the law of God; but *essentially*, it goes beyond this. *Actually*, a sinner is a transgressor of the law of God; but *essentially*, a hater of God. Sinners, as such, hate God morally; and God hates them judicially. The hatred is mutual, though totally dissimilar. All, and every sin is against one or more of the perfections of God; and the sinner is a hater of the God of all perfection. God also is angry with the wicked every day: Psa. vii. 11; and his face is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth: Psa. xxxiv. 16. The sinner, as such, is not only a hater of God: Rom. i. 30; but his carnal mind is enmity against God—enmity in the abstract—total enmity against God; it is not subject to the law of God, *neither indeed can be*: Rom. viii. 7. God also, is glorious in holiness, of purer eyes than to behold evil, and *cannot look on iniquity*: Hab. i. 13. Therefore there can be no possible acceptableness in any sinner, as such, to him; nor in him to any sinner; neither can any sinner, as such, receive an invitation from him. It is contrary to the nature of things, to propriety, and to truth, for God to invite a sinner, as such, because of a total want of acceptableness. There is no possible room for an invitation. Or does the Father of mercies tantalize him with an invitation, who is enslaved

under a *will not* of enmity, and a *cannot* of impotence? Does God excite thus the sinner's rage, exult over his weakness, and increase his sin? Impossible! But would not these be the legitimate consequences? Men may be careless about reconciling; but God is righteous, and he reprobates that which is not.

2. Sinners, as such, are called the *men of this world*: Psa. xvii. 14. They are born in the world; and there they are at home. There all their alliances are formed; and there their affections centre. The world comprehends all their profits and pleasures, their good and their glory, their plenitude and prospects. Of the world they are constantly in pursuit; and indeed, they do not inherit the earth, but (perhaps it may be said,) the earth inherits them, body and soul. They know nothing of a better country, nor do they want. You might with more propriety invite a man of this world to travel with you in a balloon to Jupiter, than to invite him to walk with you by faith in Jesus Christ to heaven; for that he can see, this he cannot. He will not deny himself, and sell his possessions to follow, he knows not whom; to go, he knows not where; to possess, he knows not what. All his perceptions and gratifications are sensual; and it is a maxim with him, that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. He neither sees, nor feels anything spiritual; and what is not perceptible by his senses, is folly, or nothing to him. "Eternal blessings" are heavenly. Heavenly blessings are only suitable to persons who are born from above; who can understand somewhat of heavenly things; who have a heavenly disposition; who bear a heavenly image; who are made partakers of the heavenly calling, and are qualified for heavenly commerce, and who are desirous of, and are pilgrims to, a heavenly country. There is no suitableness between a man of this world, whose god is his belly, and the "Living bread which came down from heaven;" and there is as much impropriety, in inviting such a man to a spiritual participation of such bread, as there is disparity between heaven and earth. God does not so invite. No; but he quickens him by power, and calls him effectually, according to his own purpose and grace, given in Christ Jesus before the world began. He slays the carnal enmity, creates a heavenly life, and then he says, "Ho, every one that thirsteth." "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved." But this sort of divinity is so much *above two hundred years old*, as almost to be now antiquated.

3. Flesh and spirit are opposites and contraries. There is no affinity between them. A sinner, as such, is carnal, and minds only the things of the flesh. He is sensual, serving divers lusts, not having the Spirit. The swine may be washed from the filth it has wallowed in, but it will be a swine still, and swinish. The Ethiopian may change his clothes, and his country; but his complexion he cannot. He may be naturalized in Europe, but he will still be by nature an Ethiopian. Whatsoever is born of the flesh, is flesh; and the flesh is

contrary to the spirit. They that are in the flesh, however they may be invited, cannot spiritually realize God; nor, however they may be commanded, can they please God. They cannot imbibe spiritual pleasures, perform spiritual operations, nor bear spiritual fruits, because they are destitute of spiritual principles. Similar animals cohabit; similar things cohere, unite, mix, blend, &c.; but flesh and spirit are radically dissimilar, will not, and cannot. You may offer a spiritual blessing to a carnal man, and commend its excellency as holy, and its use as sanctifying; but he will despise it for the very reasons—the very best reasons you commend it. There would be as much propriety in offering angels' food to a toad. God does not, and he emphatically forbids his servants; saying, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine:" Matt. vii. 6. God is neither the author nor abettor of monstrosity or confusion.

4. Death and life are opposites. Between these there is no suitability, no agreement, no connection, no sympathy. In death it may be said, there is no heart, no vision, no hearing, no smell, no touch, no taste; all capability of perception, and pleasure, is wanting. A sinner, as such, is dead while he lives—dead in trespasses and sins. He may be said,

1st. To be without heart. God manifested in the flesh is the mystery of godliness; but the sinner, as such, has no heart to understand it. But those to whom this mystery is made known, had the promise of a heart to know: Jer. xxiv. 7; and xxxi. 34; they now have the promised blessing, for to them it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom, but to those who are without, they are parables: Matt. xiii. 11; yea, foolishness; and they cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned: 1 Cor. ii. 14.

2nd. Without spiritual vision. Christ, to the believer's view, is "altogether lovely;" but the unconverted, like the companions of Saul, do not see him. The things of salvation are hid from them: Matt. xi. 25; and so is the gospel: 2 Cor. iv. 3, 4. And it is only as God shines into the heart, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, that any man seeth the "Light of life." To invite a blind man to see, is folly; to command him, is cruel.

3rd. Without spiritual hearing. The sinner can morally regard the gospel, but he cannot spiritually know the "joyful sound." Christ never invited or commanded the deaf, as such, to hear in any sense. He gave the natural faculty to many, he gives the spiritual faculty to all who possess it, and he has pronounced the ears of all spiritual hearers blessed. Who would think of inviting, or commanding the deaf to hear?

4th. Without spiritual smell. He perceives not the odour of life in the gospel; while to the living, the savour of the Saviour's good

ointments therein, makes the very mention of his name as ointment poured forth, and quickens affection : Song i. 3.

5th. Without spiritual touch. John handled the "Word of life" believingly, and so the woman touched the hem of his garment; and so, in a spiritual sense, do saints now. Men might come into contact with Christ, and they may (so to speak) come into contact with him through the gospel now; but there is a great difference between a senseless contact, and a perceiving touch. There is neither sympathy, nor sweetness, in a senseless contact; but there is inexpressibly more in a vital touch.

6th. Without spiritual taste. Saints eat the flesh of Christ, and drink his blood; and by these their spiritual life is nourished, which he, as God immortal, eternal, and Mediator, has given them. But the sinner, as such, has no such life to be nourished, nor gust to perceive the sweetness of the spiritual nourishment.

If "sympathy with God" is the best Christian experience, however much a sinner, as such, be invited to it, he cannot know it; for, being spiritually dead, the power of sympathy with God is wanting in him. Moreover, all antipathies against God are embodied in him naturally, and radically; they are exemplified variously, and remain in immoveable hostility, otherwise than as they may be subjugated by omnipotent operations of grace. Command the dead! What a magnificent idea! Invite the dead! What unparalleled sympathy! What splendid results may we not expect from such stirring procedures! Doubtless we shall hear one universal response, from Dan to Beersheba, of our moral Kibroth-Hattaavah, and see all the graves of lust yield up their dead! The Bible has been considered to stand unrivalled among books, for the sublimity of its subjects, and the majesty of its diction; yea, it has been called the "god of books;" *but it certainly has nothing like this.* I will now briefly consider the remarks our author has made on this grave question. And,

It appears, Mr. C. complains, that those ministers, who refuse to invite unconverted sinners to come to Christ, call those who do so, by hard names. Without for one moment attempting to justify a bad spirit, or an invidious nomenclature, is there not a cause? True philanthropy and the love of God, require the exposure of error, and the defence of the truth. "All the promises of God are in Christ yea, and in him amen, unto the glory of God by us:" 2 Cor. i. 20. Any denial of this, implicit or explicit, tacit or declared, as it impugns the honor of God, and disturbs the fixity of the humbled sinner's hope, ought to be sternly met, and vigorously refuted. Grind the golden god to powder.

Our author states, "He was convinced by the force of simple scripture truth, that he could not preach the gospel in a scriptural manner, unless he invited sinners, as such, to come to the marriage." A mighty argument, truly; and intended to confirm this view of the question, in the minds of "*all ministers of the gospel!*" However,