

THE
BIBLICAL REPERTORY.

APRIL, 1834.

No. II.

James Carnahan
ART. I.—*An Address delivered before the Alumni Association of Nassau Hall, on the day of the Annual Commencement of the College, Sept. 25, 1833, by John Sergeant, LL. D.*

THE day which closes the college life of a young man, is highly interesting, not only to the individual, but also to his friends and to his country.

Having finished his preparatory studies, he is ready to select a profession or occupation for life. Released from the inspection and control of teachers, he is henceforth to follow, in a great measure, his own guidance.

On such occasions, the most heedless can hardly exclude from their minds serious reflections respecting the past, and painful solicitude respecting the future. At this moment, whatever directions, or warnings, or encouragements may be given, by men of distinguished talents and virtues, cannot fail to make a deep and salutary impression on the youth anxious to know which way to direct his steps. On this account we cannot too highly commend the custom which prevails of having addresses delivered on the anniversaries of our literary institutions, by men eminent in civil and professional life. When the subject is well chosen and when the speaker is adequate to the task which he has undertaken, the most happy results may be safely anti-

helps to aid them in preparing for the service; they devote themselves to this special duty, aiming to forward the religion of Christ, by making it understood, and bring their pupils under its influence.

When such a system as this, consistent as it is with the principles of the Bible, owned by the divine approbation, and directed by the Church, is offered to a parent, surely there is an obligation on him either to avail himself of its gratuitous privileges, or to be sure that his own care at home renders such a resort unnecessary. It is not a device to relieve parents of their responsibility, or to enable them to dispose of their children on the Lord's day, or merely to keep them from profaning it; it is not an unimportant appendage to the Church, which may be disregarded and forgotten by its members, and consigned to the charity of a few teachers. It is the *nursery of the Church*, and demands the protection, the support, and the prayers of the Church. We have considered the Institution in this special light in a former number,* and shall here leave it in the connexion in which it occurs among the auxiliaries to Christian duty, which claim the serious regard of every consistent parent.

M. B. W. M. G. G.

ART. III.—*The Bible the Christian's Standard.*

ALL men have some general standard of action; and this standard, whatever it may be, will determine the character. The world abounds with false standards, while there is one, and only one in the universe, that is right. This God himself hath framed; and it is identified with the richest gift, next to the Saviour himself, which he has ever bestowed upon the world. This gift is the Bible; which reveals not only a perfect rule of conduct, but a perfect way of salvation. Let all standards then which are opposed in any degree to this be cast to the winds; and let all men, as they regard their own highest interests, and as they revere the authority, and dread the displeasure of God, keep "to the law and the testimony."

Our design in this article is to hold up *the Bible as the only authoritative standard*; as the great rule by which we are to settle our faith, by which we are to regulate our conduct, by which we are to try our characters; and then to notice some of the *advantages* which will result from our adopting and adhering to this rule.

* *Biblical Repertory*, July 1832.

The Bible is the only rule by which we are *to try the principles of our faith*. It is so in distinction from human *authority* and human *reason*.

Human *authority*.—We do not mean to intimate that no advantage is to be derived in this respect from uninspired men and uninspired books; on the contrary, he who should turn his back upon these, would certainly set at nought an important means of good; and besides, Providence has clearly intimated that it is right to avail ourselves of human helps in forming our religious opinions, by having made parents and teachers responsible for the first religious impressions which are communicated to children. We say then it *is* right that, in learning the mind of the Spirit, we should not only consult the record itself, but the commentaries, and treatises, and catechisms, and systems of great and good men; and he who is too wise to be instructed by any of them, is most probably too wise to open his mind and heart to the teachings of the Spirit. The point to be insisted upon in this matter, is, that all human productions should be kept in their proper place; that they should be considered merely as helps in interpreting God's word, and not be substituted in place of it. Be it that children in the earliest stage of their existence must depend on their parents for their views of religious truth,—yet, whenever they arrive at the period in which they are capable of examining the Bible for themselves, they are bound to do so; and if they neglect it, every error which they hold, however early they may have heard it inculcated, involves aggravated guilt. The Bible is a plain book. It commends itself to the understanding and conscience of every one who studies it with an honest and docile spirit. No man then can have any apology for holding a fundamental error; not even in the fact that he inherited it from his parents, or learned it in the catechisms and standards of his church. Parents, and catechisms, and standards, have no dominion over his conscience, any farther than they speak in accordance with the lively oracles.

Let us say a word here in respect to church standards and confessions of faith. It has been common for some religious sects in modern times to speak against all creeds and confessions as worse than useless, on the ground that they were a substitute for the Bible: but this is misrepresentation; and it is what their advocates would revolt at as truly as their opposers. They are designed not to take the place of God's word, but simply as an epitome of what God's word is supposed to contain. When I subscribe to a confession of faith, the language of that act is, not that this confession is the *ultimate* standard of truth, but merely that it expresses what *I* believe are the genuine doctrines

of the Bible. And who will question my right to do this? I do not thereby infringe upon the liberty of any other man—I merely express my own convictions. There may be those bearing the Christian name who reject doctrines which I may consider fundamental; and I may refuse to recognise them as Christians; but the ultimate ground of this refusal is, not that the doctrines which they reject are prominent in my confession of faith, but that I regard them as prominent in the Bible; in other words, it is because I consider the individuals concerned as disbelieving the testimony of God. And if one man has a right to express his conviction of what constitute the doctrines of the Bible, so has another, so have any number; and they have a right to associate together in church fellowship, taking this common expression of their belief as the basis of their communion. No individual can honestly join himself to such an association, if his views differ materially from what they have taken as their standard; nor can any one honestly and consistently remain in such an association, if his views of Christian doctrine become materially changed. The language we hold by joining ourselves to it, or by remaining in it, is simply this—that we regard it as maintaining the great principles of gospel truth and order. We still take the Bible as the ultimate standard; and the only ground for regard to any confession of faith, is that we suppose it to be conformed to the Bible.

But we are to take God's word as the rule of faith, not in opposition to human authority only, but to human *reason*. There have always been men who have manifested a disposition to be wise above what is written; to substitute their own speculations for the simple verities of God's word. In the indulgence of this propensity, some have completely annihilated the Gospel, while others have greatly weakened its energy and obscured its glory. We do not object to human philosophy—we only insist that it should be kept in its place; that it should neither be substituted for the doctrines of the Gospel, nor so connected with them as to hinder their legitimate efficacy. Reason has certainly something to do in respect to religion: she has to weigh and decide upon the evidence that the Bible is the word of God; and she has moreover, to determine what the Bible actually contains; but if she attempt any thing beyond this, she manifestly strays beyond her province. Then and only then, is she in her right place, when, with a spirit of humility and docility, she is inquiring, "What saith the Lord?"

The Bible is the great standard by which we are *to regulate our conduct*.

Men adopt a variety of standards in this respect, according to

the circumstances in which they are placed, and the ruling passion by which they are controlled. Even professing Christians, to a great extent, adopt other rules of living than those which are contained in God's word. They measure themselves by each other; and instead of inquiring of conscience, and the God of conscience, what is right, they look to others who have the weight of Christian obligation resting upon them, and who *ought* to exhibit an example which it is safe to follow. But all this is utterly wrong. The only rule they have a right to think of for a moment, is the perfect rule which God's word exhibits. Say, if you will, that Christians are often called to act in cases which no precept of God's word *particularly* contemplates—yet there are no cases which the *spirit* of his word does not contemplate; and very few in respect to which the Bible does not speak to an enlightened conscience in such a manner as to preclude doubt. The grand difficulty is, not that there is any obscurity in the rule of duty, as it is laid down in the Bible, but that men will not contemplate it—will not study it: they love darkness rather than light, and hence they turn aside from the Bible to some human standard that is more accommodating to their corrupt inclinations.

Let us illustrate more fully what we mean. A professing Christian is tempted towards some scene of vain amusement or forbidden pleasure—his conscience is right, but his inclination wrong; and instead of looking to the Bible, which would settle the question of duty in a moment, by saying, "Be not conformed to this world," he begins to look at one and another of his fellow professors, and those perhaps who may have been considered sufficiently strict, and inquires whether they have not sometimes done the very thing to which he is tempted; and when he finds that he can plead the authority of their example, he asks for nothing beyond it. So too, a professor may be tempted to defraud his neighbor in a slight degree in a bargain, and instead of looking at God's word which says imperatively, "Defraud no man," he turns his thoughts to some other professors whom he may have known guilty of some similar aberration; and with their example in his eye, he goes forward and commits the sin without much compunction. Now this is the exact opposite of what the Christian's duty requires. If we would know what we ought to do in any given case, our only inquiry should be, "what the *Lord* will have us to do."

The Bible furnishes the rule by which we are *to try our own characters*.

The question more interesting to every individual than any other, is, whether he has experienced that great change without

which no one can ever enter heaven. There are many, indeed, who practically treat this as an unimportant matter, and never take the trouble to refer their character to *any* standard; but there are many others who earnestly desire to possess evidence that they have been renewed; and of these not a small number judge their experience by other standards than that which the Bible furnishes. Some will have it that the great evidence of Christian character is to be sought in a life of honesty or of active benevolence; and because they are conscious of general uprightness in their dealings with men, and in giving liberally of their substance for the promotion of Christ's cause, though they have no real love to the Saviour, and no intelligent acquaintance with his doctrines, they take the comfort of thinking that they rank among his friends. Others make the great evidence of piety to consist in burning zeal; and because they find themselves possessed of it, they imagine that they are certainly Christians, though they have nothing of the spirit of humility, or charity, or genuine devotion. Some fasten upon one grace, and some upon another, as if it were the whole of the Christian character; and because they find something which they imagine is like it in themselves, (too often, there is reason to fear, it is not the genuine quality) they confidently conclude that they have been born from above, and not improbably pass severe judgment upon those whom they suppose, in that particular, to fall below themselves.

But very unlike all this is the *Bible* standard of Christian character. The Bible Christian is he who understands and believes the great truths of the Bible; who feels their influence on his heart, and exhibits that influence in his conduct. It is not he who has merely a knowledge of God's truth; nor he who has merely an occasional gust of religious feeling; nor he who is merely exemplary in his external deportment; but it is he in whose character, knowledge, and feeling, and action are all combined. And he who would know whether he be a Christian in deed and in truth, must inquire whether such be his own character. If he suppose that he has evidence of possessing only one of the Christian graces, and is relying upon that as evidence of his piety, it is altogether probable that he is deceiving his own soul. The Christian character, though it is a consistent and beautiful whole, is nevertheless made up of many parts; and in investigating our claim to it, we ought to extend our inquiry to every part, and especially to those which the Bible makes most important.

What are some of the *ADVANTAGES* that would result from adopting and adhering to this rule?

It would *impose a powerful check upon religious controversy.*

It admits of no question that the controversies which have existed in the church in respect to religion have been one of the most formidable obstacles to the progress of the Gospel; and amidst the disputes which have arisen in respect to what religion is, multitudes have found it an easy matter to act upon the principle that it is nothing. Nay, there is scarcely any point which infidels have made more prominent in their attacks on the Gospel, than the fact that its advocates could not agree in respect to its doctrines; and that what some professing Christians have regarded as of great importance, others have rejected as absolutely false. Now there is no room for question that this evil is to be referred more than to any other cause, to a disposition to be wise above what is written; to substitute human philosophy for the simple testimony of God, or at least to add the one to the other. Let all who profess to be Christians consent to bring their opinions to this simple test, and instead of inquiring what is, or what is not, consistent with some favourite system of human philosophy, let them simply ask, "What saith the Lord?" and rely on it, most of the controversies which exist in the church, and even some which are conducted with the greatest asperity, would be banished at once; and some who seem now to be at a great distance from each other, would be seen walking together in the love and fellowship of the Gospel.

An adherence to the Gospel standard *would contribute much to Christian consistency and decision.* A Christian may be said to be inconsistent, when one part of his conduct does not agree with another, or when any part of it is at variance with the word of God. There are some men who profess a strong regard to the truths of the Bible in conversation, who yet manifest but an equivocal regard for them in their lives. There are some who appear devout without being charitable; and some who seem to be full of Christian sympathy and kindness, who nevertheless exhibit less relish for devotion, and other more spiritual parts of religion than could be desired. There are those too, who, without evincing much positive regard for religion in any way, by their worldliness, by their levity, by their opposition to good objects of various kinds, make the cause of the Redeemer bleed continually. Let a professor of religion be in some respects exemplary; let him in certain departments of religious action even be a model, and at the same time let his deportment in other respects be loose and unedifying, and it is probable that the bad influence he exerts, will preponderate over the good—the world who look on and scrutinize his conduct will find it much easier to account for what may seem good in it in consistency with his being a bad man, than for what may seem evil,

and what really is evil, in consistency with his being a good man. Many a true Christian, no doubt, who has been influenced in the main by a sincere desire to glorify Christ, and who has really brought forth much fruit to his honour, has greatly abridged his good influence by being conformed in some respect to the world, or by being delinquent in some course of duty, of which perhaps he may have formed a partial or erroneous estimate.

Let the Christian take the Bible as his only standard, and this evil he will of course effectually avoid. Here are rules to guide him in every part of his conduct; and in adhering to them, he can exhibit no other than a consistent character. By doing the various duties which devolve upon him, at the proper time, and in the proper place, he cannot fail to let his light shine before men.

But the adherence to this standard is not less important to Christian *decision* than to Christian consistency. Wherefore is it that when Christians are placed in circumstances of temptation, they so often yield, and thus shamefully violate covenant obligations, and bring a reproach on the cause of Christ? Wherefore is it that they so often seem embarrassed as to what they ought to do, and after reflecting, and hesitating, and counting the cost on one side and not on the other, finally do wrong? The great reason is that they are looking away from the perfect and unerring standard of God's word, to the low standards of human opinion. There is ordinarily no difficulty in the case but what they themselves make; and they make it by turning their eye away from the perfect rule of duty. That individual who makes it a rule to ask but this single question in respect to any case in which he may be called to act—"What does God require me to do?"—will rarely be at loss in regard to the course he shall adopt. And acting upon this principle he will acquire a firmness of purpose which nothing can shake—he will have genuine decision of character—decision based on Christian principle. And while this will give an energy and efficiency to all that he does, it will impart to his general character an influence, the extent of which it is not easy to calculate. Witness examples of this in Moses, and Daniel, and Paul, and Luther, and a host of martyrs, who valued their convictions of truth and duty so much, that, rather than abandon them, they have marched fearlessly and triumphantly to the stake.

An adherence to this great standard would be *the best security against a false hope of an interest in Christ*. There is always danger that persons will think themselves Christians when they are not so; owing to the difficulty of distinguishing between true and false experience—a difficulty which arises from

the deceitfulness of the heart, and the power and wiles of the adversary. And while this danger is incident to any period, it is especially incident to a period of great excitement—such as that upon which the church at this day has fallen. It is no doubt one of the great errors of the day that men are encouraged to think themselves converted too soon; and instead of *proving themselves*, they too often rely on the favourable opinion of their minister, or some other persons; and there is reason to fear, often settle down permanently on a false foundation. It is impossible, from the nature of the case, that any sufficient evidence of Christian character should be gained in a moment, or a day, or a week. There may indeed, in so short a period, be much transport; there may be bright visions of God and of heaven; and so too they may prove to be not the visions of Christian faith, but the delusions of a heated fancy. The scriptural evidence of regeneration is to be sought in holiness of heart and life. This always exists at first as a very feeble principle; but it gradually expands and developes itself, so that its existence may ultimately be known, if the Christian is faithful, with absolute assurance. Let the principle be generally adopted, that the slightest change of feeling, when the sinner is under conviction, or indeed any change of feeling he can experience, is to be taken as sufficient evidence of conversion, and you will see the number multiplying on every side who are going down in the light, or rather the darkness, of a false hope, to the chambers of death; and let this be the evidence on which the doors of the visible church are open to receive communicants, and you may rest assured that there will soon be an amount of spurious religion in the church, which will be just cause for her putting on the garments of sackcloth.

The way, and the only way, of guarding against this evil, is to refer all religious experience, or all that purports to be such, to the unerring standard. Each one must do this for himself, if he will not run the hazard of being found at last with the hypocrite's hope. And so too ministers and Christians must do the same thing in respect to others, especially in seasons of revival, when, from the strong excitement that often exists, there is extreme danger of self-deception. When an individual begins to express a hope that he has obtained God's gracious forgiveness, while he receives all the encouragement the case will warrant, let him be distinctly admonished of the deceitfulness of the heart, of the importance of self-examination, and especially of his trying himself not by the opinions of men, but by the perfect standard of God's word. And we cannot repress the conviction that, if all were to be withdrawn from the church, who have come in in consequence of judging themselves by a wrong standard, we

should find a large accession to the ranks of those who are confessedly strangers to the power of religion.

An adherence to the standard furnished by God's word, would *save true Christians from forming erroneous estimates of their own spiritual condition.*

Every Christian knows, and most know by sad experience, that good men are liable to grievous backsliding; and sometimes they wander long before they are reclaimed. Now it often happens that the Christian backslides, while he is scarcely sensible of it. And the reason is that he is not comparing his feelings and his conduct with the divine rule; he is looking rather to the opinions and example of his fellow men. In this way he, imperceptibly to himself, declines, and is scarcely sensible of any unfavourable change in his spiritual condition, till he finds himself at a great distance from God, and begins to doubt whether all his previous experience has not been delusion.

But in this state, again, he is liable to be misled by looking at a wrong standard. It has been specially common in latter years for Christians who may have been cold or backslidden, in seasons of unusual excitement, to give up their hopes, and proclaim to the world their conviction that they had hitherto been strangers to the renewing grace of God. No doubt there are cases in which a false hope is detected in such circumstances, and then surely it is right to abandon it; but it may be doubted, even then, whether more harm than good will not result from the fact being published to the world: better, we verily believe, that the world should learn the change from a subsequent change of conduct than from any professions, which have almost always the appearance of ostentation. But the remark which we were about to make is, that Christians, from looking away from the true standard, may sometimes too readily cast away their hope, and write bitter things against themselves. If you look into the Bible, you will find that David and Job and other holy men, were subject to seasons of desertion, and temptation, and spiritual despondency; and one reason why these things are recorded respecting them is, that they may help the faith and encourage the hope of other Christians in similar circumstances. It seems to be part of the economy of sanctification that Christians should sometimes have their seasons of darkness and trial; and though during such seasons there may be special reason why they should inspect closely the evidence of their discipleship, they are not warranted, they are not permitted, for a light reason, to refuse the comfort that may really belong to them—that of hoping that they have been born of the Spirit.

A proper regard to the Bible as a standard of faith and conduct

would *minister greatly to all the interests of the church.* On the one hand, it would keep out error; on the other, it would secure the prevalence of truth in all its greatness and power. On the one hand, it would make men earnest in defence of the faith once delivered to the saints; on the other, it would induce a spirit of gentleness and kindness towards those whom they regard in error. It would increase a deep, and earnest, and glowing piety, while it would banish inconsistency, irreverence and delusion. It would put out the wild-fire of fanaticism, while it would cause the fire of true devotion, of holy zeal, of genuine love to God and man, to burn with increasing fervour. It would render the church every where, one bright field of Gospel order, so that the eyes of the world could not be turned towards it without admiration. It would, more than any thing else, nourish the spirit of genuine revivals. It would set Christians to labouring and praying, and sinners to mourning and repenting, and the angels to rejoicing and triumphing. Away then with every standard that is not in accordance with the Bible, and let this be all in all. Take it, Christian, as the rule of your faith, as the rule of your conduct, as the rule of your experience; and you will have nothing to fear as it respects your influence or your destiny. But take any thing else than this, or adopt this but partially, and if you are not a mere cumberer of the ground, you certainly will not be a flourishing plant of righteousness; if you do not actually lose your soul, it will be saved only so as by fire.

Wm. Y. S. Hoag

ART. IV.—*Decorum due to Public Worship.*

THERE is not less of truth than beauty in the declaration of the poet, that "order is Heaven's first law." We see this every where exemplified in the kingdom of nature, providence, and grace. Whether we look at the grandest or the most insignificant of the works of creation; whether we observe the revolutions of the heavenly bodies as they sweep through the illimitable regions of space, or the motion of an atom as it is borne on the wings of the wind; whether we ascertain the laws of physical existence as applied to the formation of an insect, or the laws of mental existence as exemplified in the intellect of an angel; we cannot fail to discern evidence that it is all the production of a God of order. In contemplating the system of providence too, when we make due allowance for the derangement that is occasioned by sin, we arrive at the same conclusion: we find there