

EVANGELICAL WITNESS.

VOL. I.

APRIL, 1823.

NO. IX.

PERSECUTION OF BRITISH REFORMERS.

OUR readers will recollect that upon the restoration of the house of Stewart, after the formation of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms, Directory for Worship, &c. and the swearing of the Solemn League and Covenant, by which the king and all ranks in the three kingdoms were solemnly bound to adhere to them, the throne violated its covenant with the people, and with God, and commenced a violent persecution. They have seen the Marquis of Argyle, and the Rev. Mr. Douglass, seal their attachments to these formulas, and to the covenants with their blood. The tide of persecution was not stayed by the stand which these great and good men made against the malignant enemies of truth and godliness. On the contrary its flood-gates were opened wider, and the blood of the saints flowed in greater profusion. It was not confined to Scotland, the strong hold of Presbyterianism, against which the power of the persecutors was exerted.—The object of the king and his privy councillors was to destroy utterly the Presbyterian form of church government, as well as to banish orthodoxy and godliness from the three kingdoms.

The English Presbyterians were soon made to feel the arm of power, and reap the bitter fruits of their unadvised and hasty restoration of a persecuting

other calamity, it also is inflicted, in the righteous judgments of him, without whom a hair of the head cannot perish. *Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.*

(To be continued.)

ESSAY ON TOLERANCE.

There is perhaps no word in the English language, more abused than the word *tolerance*. If a writer is found vigourously supporting any cause which he believes to be right, and endeavouring to shew that the opposite must be wrong, he is immediately styled *intolerant*. This is more especially the case in matters of religion. If he is firmly persuaded that the system of doctrines which he believes, is the system of the Bible, he is considered a bigot. If he endeavours to demonstrate that any thing is error, he is marked for intolerance.

Looking into a certain journal the other day, I observed an extract from a sermon, said to be preached by a Mr. Strong in the city of New-York, given to the public, as an evidence of the "overweening zeal and intemperance of youth," "which too often," says the journalist, "substitute violence and passion, for the meek and lowly spirit, and the persuasive accents of monition, which ought to characterize the ministers of the religion of Jesus Christ." The extract is as follows:—"There has been, and there is in this city, a spirit of political feeling, at war with the authority of God; does it not shew that there is among us as a community, a mass of political guilt, that deserves the chastisement of heaven." "Is this the language of tolerance?" says the editor of the journal, "Or the following, which describes another cause

of the Yellow Fever?" "Have you at this day that zeal for God, and for the purity of his church, that *inextinguishable hatred* of error, and that devoted attachment to the whole truth of the gospel, which you ought to have? Have we not in this city synagogues of every description, Socinian, Universalist, Arminian, &c." We leave the comment to our readers."

This is somewhat strange. I would have thought that every man but an infidel, would have agreed most heartily with the writer of the sermon, in all the causes specified, except that which notices the Socinian, Universalist, Arminian, &c. synagogues. No doubt the professors of Socinianism, Universalism, &c. would not. The editor of the journal, considers himself abused in being represented as an infidel; but it seems, he views it as utterly at war with the spirit of tolerance, to represent as causes of pestilence, "a spirit of political feeling at war with the authority of God"—"the election of an infidel in preference to a Christian"—"the refusal of the authority of God on the consciences of men, in the discharge of political duties," &c.

I dismiss the journalist, but not so the train of reflexions excited in my own mind. Tolerance, intolerance, divine authority, the Bible, conscience, the rights of conscience, &c. On some of these I shall make a few passing remarks, suggested by the above occasion.

Nothing is more evident than the being of a God; It is not less evident that he is the creator of all things. It necessarily follows that he must be a law-giver to all his creatures. They cannot be independent. Moral subjects must be governed by a moral law. All who believe the Bible to be the word of God, admit that it contains the law, by which, all men who have received it, are to be governed. I am not now considering the case of infidels, but of such as would view it as abuse to be called infidels. All Bible believers admit, that the Scriptures of the Old

and New Testaments, are the only rule of faith and manners. They are then the *law*, by which the Almighty legislator wills, that his rational subjects should be governed.

Human laws must, no doubt, be very imperfect, because men are imperfect. On the nature of moral right and wrong, they will necessarily be defective. But none will venture to say so of divine laws. They are predicated on the eternal and immutable principles of rectitude. Did the divine legislator intend that they should be operative? Is it so that they are capable of being understood? To deny either of these, would be to nullify them. A law that never was to be acted upon, would not be entitled to the name of a law. An unintelligible law would be a disgrace to its maker. It is presumed, that representing the laws of the ruler of the universe, either as inoperative, or unintelligible, would be to insult him to his face.

Is it meant by tolerance, that the divine law in every case, or in some cases, ought to be dispensed with?—that there is no divine law? or if there be, that it ought not to be acted upon? What is this thing called tolerance? Again, what is intolerance? Is it a contending that God has a right to rule—that he has actually given laws—and that they ought to be obeyed? Is the man an intolerant man, who contends that God has given laws to the universe? Some men would exclude religion from having any place in the world; but the modern vocabulary of tolerance and intolerance seems disposed to exclude the Almighty himself, from having any rule in his own creation.

But it will be said, no human interference ought to be permitted. If God chooses to make laws, they must not be executed by fallible men.

In reply to this, it might be inquired, what if the divine law actually contemplated, and positively required a human executor? “He that sheddeth man’s blood, by *man* shall his blood be shed.” “*Thou* shalt

throw down their altars, *thou* shalt break in pieces their images, and burn their groves with fire." Is this intolerance? It will readily be granted, that there ought to be no human interference without a divine command. Had the Israelites put the Canaanites to death without the command of God, it would no doubt, have been murder. So it would be in putting any man to death. God has given to every living man his life, and who dare take it away *unbidden* by the divine giver? Still it will be urged, that although God has a right to give laws, yet men will differ about the meaning of these laws, and the law is, as every one understands it.

Is this, or is it not, the destruction of all law? Would the United States suffer their laws to be thus interpreted? Would any state in the union? Yet the executors of these laws are all fallible and imperfect men; and some of these laws too, respect life and death. No matter what the reason may be, if a law cannot be put in execution, that law is nugatory.

But it will be replied, states have a right to make laws, and human laws can be understood.

If this is not meant to say, that God has not a right to make laws, or that his laws cannot be understood, it says nothing. As an insulated truth, it is no objection to what is here contended for, and is out of place, as having no bearing on the subject. But if it is attended as an objection, the objection will be welcome to the consequence. It will not avail, to say, as is often said, that there are many deep, mysterious doctrines in the Bible, that men differ widely about articles of faith—who will be the judge, &c. because all this a palpable evasion. The question is not about mere matters of faith, but matters of practice. It respects the duties required, and the crimes forbidden, by the lawgiver of heaven and earth—what he commands to be done, and what to be avoided.

It might not be amiss to enquire, whether God *could* give laws that men ought to act upon? It is presumed, that few would have the hardihood to say, in so many words, he could not. And yet this is often said by consequence. After it is urged, that fallible and imperfect men have no right to meddle with divine laws. What! even though God has commanded them. Did the divine Lawgiver lose his right to command man, because they are imperfect and fallible? How came they to be imperfect, surely, by their sin and rebellion against God. And did this put it out of the power of the Almighty to give them a law? Did man sin himself into independence? Did he, by rebelling against God, put himself out of the control of his Maker? This would, indeed, be an easy way to get clear of divine authority.

It may still be alledged, that it is not with respect to individual and personal responsibility, that the case is argued; but with respect to society.

Then it is only society that is out of the reach of divine legislation. But why should not the omnipotent be allowed the right to make laws for society? What attribute of God would prevent his presiding, authoritatively, over the social compact? Let us enquire into the nature of society. Is it a self-originating thing? Who created society? Was it not God who said, *it is not good that man should be alone*? Did not the Creator bestow upon man a social nature? And is not social, as well as individual man, amenable to the laws of his Creator? If society be of God's creating, and not a creature of the creature, then has God a right to prescribe the laws by which society shall be governed. It would seem that wherever there are relations among men, the laws regulating these relations, belong to divine government.

It may yet be objected, that this view of the matter will give the Bible a decided preference: And it will be asked, are not the rights of those who deny the Bible as sacred, as those of the Bible believer?

It will be admitted that this view does indeed give the Bible a preference, while it is readily granted that the *rights* of Deists are to be held sacred.—All rights are, or ought to be sacred. If murderers have rights, let them be scrupulously respected. A right is a right, wherever it is found. The right of a Deist to deny divine revelation, or that the Bible is so, is what the objection contemplates. Now it may be doubted whether any man has that right, or rather whether it be a right. It might be enquired, can God give a revelation of his will to men? It is presumed that this will be admitted to be competent to Deity. If God gives such a revelation, it may be asked, whether it has any claim on the faith of those to whom it is made known? Are they bound to believe it? And if it prescribes laws for the regulation of their conduct, are they bound to obey these laws? The question may be shortly this, has God a right to command them? or have they a right to reject the command? The question at issue is about the paramount authority. God cannot have a right to command their acceptance of his revelation, and they a right to reject it at the same time. The one destroys the other. Let it be admitted, that the paramount authority is on the side of God Almighty and the supposed right of the Deist will be a non-entity. There is no such right. This in modern style, may be called persecution. So the government of God may be called tyranny. No matter. Still the Supreme Being will govern, and his law must be obeyed, or men must abide the consequences.

It will, no doubt, be urged, that the right of conscience is a sacred right—that whatever a man's conscience thinks right, is right to him. No matter whether he be a Jew, a Christian, a Pagan, or a Mahometan—whether he believes the Bible or the Koran, or that both are an imposition, provided he *conscientiously* believes what he does believe. Every

man has an inalienable and indefeasible right to think, believe, and act, according to the dictates of his own conscience. And to call this in question is tyrannical, and to attempt to prevent it is persecution.

-In answer to this, it would be necessary to settle the point, what is conscience, and what is right?—Conscience may be considered as a faculty or power of the soul of man, by which, as a judge, he passes sentence, in God's name, upon his own conduct. It is the deputy or vicegerent of God in the soul, which pronounces in his name, a sentence of approbation, or disapprobation, on human conduct, according as it appears to be morally right or wrong. Respect must be had, in every case, to a law. There is no possibility of knowing what is right or wrong—approvable, or disapprovable, without a law. *Sin is the transgression of the law.* The judgment passed by conscience upon an action, is a *moral* judgment. The understanding too, is a faculty of the human soul, by which we form judgments. We compare ideas—we examine evidence, and we judge of the truth or falsehood of a proposition, by the understanding. In reference to a law, we examine actions, and determine their agreement or disagreement therewith, and so pronounce them good or bad, by the exercise of the understanding. The understanding, comprehending the demonstration, judges that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.

But the conscience is distinguished, in its acts of judgment, from the understanding, inasmuch as all its judgments are *judicial*. It decides not merely as a *jury* finding a man innocent or guilty, but as the *judge* on the bench it pronounces a sentence of acquittal, or condemnation, according as the understanding has discovered an agreement, or disagreement, between the action and the law, in that case made and provided. The conscience, therefore, is not a *rule of law*, but a *judge*, applying the law to the

case in hand, and pronouncing sentence accordingly. To identify the law with the judge, is a compounding of distinct ideas and calculated to destroy the precision of language.

What then are the rights of conscience? We might perhaps understand this question, by enquiring what are the rights of a judge? They are precisely, what the law allows him. The rights of conscience are, precisely, what the law of God allows it, neither more nor less. But the law of God never can give to the conscience of man, a right to act *contrary* to that law. This would be a sanction from the law, to destroy itself—a kind of *felo de se*. Any thing, therefore, which the divine law forbids, never can be found among the *rights* of conscience.

It might, perhaps, assist us in forming correct ideas on this subject, to ask what is a *right*? It must be something the opposite of *wrong*, for these words present contradictory ideas. Right can never be understood in an immoral sense. It matters little what may be the kind of right contemplated. Every conceivable kind of right must correspond with its name. It must be moral in its nature. An immoral right i. e. a *wrong right*, is a contradiction in terms, and self-destructive. All creature rights are derived from God. But God delegates no right to think, speak, or act, otherwise than his law directs. The legislative character of the Almighty is essentially connected with his divine sovereignty. It is here, in an eminent manner, that he is a jealous God. In the article of supremacy, he will bear no competitor. He will not—he cannot share his sovereignty. Even to Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, he must necessarily say, “in the throne will I be greater than thou.” *The Lord is our Lawgiver*. How did it ever come to pass, that the breach of Jehovah’s law was denominated a right? That the conscience of man may err, is generally granted. But how does its error come to be called a right? The law of

God, whenever it is known, is the formal rule and reason of human obedience. God commands that which is right, but we obey, because we are commanded. What command of God will justify a breach of his law, even though that breach should be dignified with the name of a sacred right of conscience? If God has given a well attested revelation of his law, conscience has no right to present a negative to any part of it. The Bible of God is the law-book of his kingdom, and wherever it comes, it claims, and justly claims, a supreme and paramount authority to rule the conscience, and regulate the relations of human society. *To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.* J.

REVIEW.

Lectures upon the Principal Prophecies of the Revelation.

By Alexander M'Leod, D. D. Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, New-York. 1814. p. p. 480.

Numerous and splendid efforts are now making for the diffusion of a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, among people of all ranks, and all nations. Among those who are engaged in this from honest motives, there are probably few who do not unite with benevolent desires to promote the improvement of the condition of mankind in the present world, and the everlasting salvation of the souls of men, some hopes of the speedy breaking of a brighter day upon the church of God, when Messiah shall reign gloriously over the nations, as his willing subjects to the ends of the earth. These hopes, so far