

What Think Ye Of Christ?

Robert Hawker (1753-1827)

"What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is he?" Matthew 22:42

The religion of Jesus which we profess, demands our attention by every argument capable of interesting the human heart. The manner of its first introduction, the immense preparation which, through so many ages, preceded its establishment, its descent to us, sealed with the blood of apostles and martyrs, nay, even "God himself confirming the word with signs and wonders, and gifts of the Holy Ghost," (Heb. ii. 4.) are circumstances so very striking, as seem to render it impossible for any man to suppose, that all this mighty apparatus was intended to refer to a matter, trifling in its nature, and of no material consequence whether neglected or despised. "If they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven," (Heb. xii. 25.)

But while we feel the full influences and great importance of the gospel, we cannot but be proportionably anxious to know the truth as it is in Jesus: that we may embrace "that faith," and that faith only, "which was once delivered unto the saints," (Jude 3.) For, however pure the fountain from whence the word of God first issued, yet if it comes to us through tainted and corrupt channels, how shall we be assured that it hath not imbibed a portion of impurity?

It is a well-known truth, and cannot be dissembled, that, from the very infancy of Christianity, errors crept into the church. The tares of infidelity and scepticism were early sown with the good seed. They sprung up and appeared together, and both (as our blessed Lord himself predicted)" will grow together unto the harvest," (Matt. xiii. 30.) But let not the faithful despond on this account. Tares are always to be discerned from good seed. The Lord in his providence hath a gracious design in every dispensation. There must be heresies among you," (saith an apostle) "that they which are approved may be made manifest among you," (I Cor. xi. 19.) Even the errors of opinion, therefore, are not without their use in the present state of discipline, for they serve to ascertain and prove the truth. And from this ordeal the gospel hath been always found to come forth, not only with more clearness, but also bringing with it increasing evidence of its divine authority.

Every age hath been distinguished by some peculiar mode of hostility against the principles of our holy faith. By open attack, and by insidious design, the false friend and the professed foe have alike aimed their blows, to effect the ruin of the church. But we know who it is that hath said, his church is founded on a rock, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail," (Matt. xvi. 18.) The enemies who have come forward against Christianity, have only broken their arrows against its impenetrable shield, and, tired of the unequal combat, have withdrawn from the field in silence.

It would, however, be in vain to expect that all opposition should cease. The Lord the Spirit permits the existence of error, with a view to accomplish some greater good. By this means the truth, when discovered, is placed on a more firm and sure foundation, and in the mean time it answers the necessary ends of trial to exercise the faith of the true believer.

Besides, while the corrupt passions of the human mind remain unreformed, there will be always some who will find an interest in opposing the pure system of morality contained in the gospel, and while religion is sought for by others, "through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and not after Christ," (Coloss. ii. 8.), the pride of reason will not easily bend to the humbleness and docility of little children, which is so necessary to the reception of those doctrines by which the Christian faith is peculiarly known. From both these causes, therefore, the religion of Jesus will always sure to meet with opposition.

The controversy of the present hour seems to be particularly of this latter kind. Under the specious pretence that reason alone is competent to determine measure of religious faith, a certain class of men (and in the garb of friends to Christianity too) have presumed to analyze the several parts of revelation by this standard, and have peremptorily rejected every thing beyond the power of reason to account for, as impossible to have proceeded from God. Thus, with a rash and bold hand, they have torn from the gospel all the sacred mysteries of our holy faith, reduced the whole to a mere system of ethics, and degraded the divine Author of our salvation to a character no higher than that of a moral teacher - the equal of Socrates or Confucius. Nay, to such an height hath this doctrine advanced, that he who hath the dangerous honour of pre-eminence in this opinion hath declared, that the sentiments even of an apostle are invalid, and of no weight with him.

When errors of this fatal tendency spring up in the world, and come forth to the public under the sanction of distinguished names, we cannot be too much upon our guard, to repel the seducing influence. The GOD HEAD of CHRIST is the chief cornerstone in the edifice or Christianity. Remove this from the building and the whole fabric immediately totters. The foundation is shaken to the very centre. There appears at

once an evident disproportion between the end and the means; the importance of the object proposed, and the person by whom it was accomplished. And then the great doctrine of atonement falls to the ground, and all the rich promises of the gospel are done away.

In matters of less moment though we cannot but lament that there should be any dissensions amongst sincere professors of Christianity, yet when these refer to points of mere form or ceremony, and concern not the fundamentals of religion, it were a folly to contend. They arise from the weaknesses and prejudices of human nature, and are the result of that imperfection and frailty, which mark our very best performances. But when so vital a part of the gospel is attacked; the divinity of our blessed Lord palpably denied; himself classed among fallible men; all adoration to him expressly forbidden; and the members of the established Church branded with idolatry: it is impossible to regard such reproches with indifference. How can any true believer hear, with unconcern, that blessed Person, by whose sacred name we are called, thus degraded and traduced? Surely it must be a duty to come forward, and with becoming confidence assert the dignity of that GOD under whose banner we serve, and the purity of worship which we profess! Against assaults of this nature it can be no bigotry to remonstrate; nor will the just defence of our principles be deemed, by any liberal minds an ill-timed zeal. Nay, our silence might rather be construed into a tacit acknowledgment that we thought the charge unanswerable, and therefore meanly took refuge under an establishment which we were unable to defend.

But though gratitude, duty, and all the important interests of religion, demand this from us, and to remain supine and indifferent would be unpardonably criminal, yet, in opposing the opinions, we never oppose the persons of men. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through

God, to the pulling down of strong holds and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," (2 Cor. x. 4,5.) In the investigation of truth, every sincere friend to the gospel must wish, that all enquiries may be pursued, not only with Christian temper and candour, but with somewhat more than these, with affection and goodwill. It is not for the triumph of opinion we contend, but for truth. Our most earnest desires are, that "all may come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved," (1 Tim. ii. 4.) While anxious therefore, in the pursuit of this great point, we condemn no man for his religious principles. "To his own master he standeth or falleth," (Rom. xiv. 4.) Too conscious of our own manifold imperfections, we dare not be rigorous and unmerciful to the imperfections of others. And surrounded as we are with so much darkness in the present state of being, that we can hardly judge of the objects which are near us with any precision or certainly, we are well aware how little the wisest of us know of the nature and dispensations of God. It were to be wished that all parties and persuasions of Christians would duly consider this circumstance, that every one might "learn to think humbly of himself, and as he ought to think." But what a comfortable and encouraging relief to the mind is that gracious promise of scripture; that if we are brought under the blessed direction of the great Spirit of truth, he will guide us into all truth," (John xiv. 13.) "If we trust in the Lord, and lean not upon our own understanding, but in all our ways acknowledge him, he will direct our paths," (Prov. iii. 5, 6.) For "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will shew them his covenant," (Ps. xxv. 13.)

With these objects in view, and under an humble hope of divine assistance, it is my intention, in this and a few following discourses, to examine the evidences of our Lord's divinity. The question is exceedingly interesting, and the event important. For if it can be proved that the testimony of scripture is against this doctrine; it will follow, that the faith we

profess, and the form of worship we observe, are founded on wrong principles; and all the venerable sanction of names, or the zeal of godly reformers, will be utterly insufficient to justify our continuance in them. But should it appear from the strictest investigation, that this great article of our church arises immediately from the scriptures themselves, and derives its influence wholly from this supreme authority; we have only to pity and pray for the conversion of those who differ from us. Their objections, instead of injuring our cause, will have proved beneficial to it, by enabling us to shew that "our faith does not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God," (I Cor. ii. 5.)

In the prosecution of this design, it will be my duty to bring before you the evidences we are in possession of, to prove the GODHEAD of CHRIST. It will be yours to examine the same with carefulness and impartiality. And as our salvation is blended together, and rests upon the same common cause, you will give credit at least to my integrity, if not to my understanding. I should be utterly unworthy the sacred office I hold among you, were I capable of temporizing upon so awful a concern. I scruple not therefore to say, I have received myself the belief of this great doctrine with the fullest conviction. It is the faith in which I trust, under the divine grace, always to live, and in which I hope to die. But, while anxious to discharge what appears to be only my duty, in placing this great principle of the gospel before you, upon its proper basis, I desire no one implicitly to follow my opinion. Upon so momentous a concern, every man, as far as he is able, should judge for himself. Like the Bereans, who are mentioned in sacred history with such honourable testimony, I would wish you to "search the scriptures daily whether these things are so," (Acts, xvii. 11.) Happy is that Christian whose experience in divine truths confirms the doctrines there revealed! Who (as the apostle says) from "believing on the Son of God hath the witness in himself," (I John v. 10.) If

religion be at all important, it must be highly important; indifference is unpardonable; inattention somewhat worse than folly. It is certainly the duty of every individual to be able to satisfy his own mind at least, if not to give an answer to others, of the hope that is in him: and that man must be strangely lost to all the great objects of eternity, who can sit down regardless in a matter of such infinite consequence, and which so highly concerns the salvation of his soul. Bend with me, I beseech you, before the awful throne of God, and let us humbly implore assistance from above, that the attention to this solemn subject, both of him who speaks and those who hear, may be rewarded with his grace. That "God may give, unto us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of our understanding being enlightened, that we may know what is the hope of our calling, (Eph. i. 18, 19,) that we may prove things that are excellent, and that we may be sincere and without offence unto the day of Christ," (Phil. i. 10.)

And here, before I open the evidences in support of our blessed Lord's divinity, I beg once for all to premise, that I shall draw no conclusions in favour of this doctrine, but from Scripture; for on all disputable points in religion, this certainly is the only unerring standard of our judgment. I am free to confess that the whole body or commentators are nothing decisive with me on this important point. Whoever implicitly follows the opinion of men may be deceived. From the pure and uncorrupt word of God, there can be no danger of error or delusion. It is to this authority only I bend: and I trust you will find nothing in the course of these sermons insisted upon with the smallest emphasis, but what can clearly be proved from the testimony of Scripture.

It will be unnecessary to produce any evidence of the authenticity of the sacred books themselves. The hardiest champions of fidelity have never yet been able to disprove the

marks of genuine truth and purity with which these records are transmitted to us. Were these discourses, indeed, levelled against the controversial writings of deists, it might be needful to take a larger circuit, and to shew the authority on which they rest. But as my present design is of another nature, and intended only to prevent your minds from being led away by an opinion injurious to Christianity, and advanced by Christians themselves, who acknowledge with us the writings of the New Testament to be genuine, it is not necessary, upon this occasion, to bring forward any evidence in their support. Taking it for granted, therefore, that the sacred volume is admitted to be authentic, I shall immediately proceed to bring before you that great body of evidence with which the Scriptures abound, to prove the deity of the Son of God, and that Jesus is, in the fullest sense of the expression, "one with the Father-over all, God blessed for ever. Amen."

The words of the text which I have thought to be most pertinent to the purpose of opening the subject on the divinity of Christ, are not a little demonstrative of the great point in question.

Our blessed Lord had been interrogated by the Pharisees and Sadducees, (and it should seem not with the most friendly design,) upon certain matters of opinion peculiar to each sect. After this conference, Jesus himself proposed to them the question in the text: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord; saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy foot-stool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?" Let any man of plain common understanding read this passage as it stands in the New Testament, and then determine for himself; Will it not instantly strike him, that our blessed Lord meant to infer, that somewhat above the nature of an human being was appointed to distinguish the

character of the Messiah? That, notwithstanding Christ, according to the flesh, was to spring from the seed of David, yet, at the same time, by his superior nature, he was to be David's Lord. That our Saviour's argument was considered in this light by his hearers, and that it wrought a conviction of this kind upon their minds, seems highly probable; for the Evangelist adds, "They were not able to answer him a word, neither durst any man, from that day forth, ask him any more questions."

But passing by this argument in favour of our cause, I lay no stress upon it. It is the question only in the text which I wish to make use of as the basis of this discourse: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?" Is he, according to the opinion of our modern Socinians, simply no other than a man; or, agreeable to the doctrine of the Scriptures, is he the Son of God? This is the great and interesting question to be discussed in the prosecution of this subject. And my sincere prayers to God are, that void of all party persuasion, and unbiassed by the smallest prejudice, our researches may be directed by the influence of that blessed Spirit of truth, "which will guide us into all truth."

To a mind perfectly free from prepossession, and open to conviction, the numberless passages we meet with in Scripture, which fully and unequivocally declare Christ to be the Son of God, might, one would think, decidedly prove his Godhead. For such a distinguished and peculiar appellation cannot, with the smallest shadow of reason, be applied to him, unless his pretensions to the relationship it includes be also admitted.

Some, however, who have considered our blessed Lord in a higher degree of dignity than any prophet or messenger of God who preceded him; have yet conceived that nothing valid to the argument can be derived from this phrase of "Son of

God," with which Christ is every where distinguished in the sacred writings. And, among other reasons, they have assigned that this title is sometimes given also in Scripture to angels, to magistrates, and even good Christians. It is wonderful that men of the most penetrating abilities should not immediately perceive the very dissimilar circumstances under which this appellation is used when applied to men, and when spoken of him who is not only said to be "the Son of God;" but declared to be the Son of God "with power," and also "the express image of his person," (Rom. i. 4. Heb. i. 3.) They who are so ready to class our Lord's pretensions to this title with those of the general mass of eminent persons to whom it is sometimes given, would be at a loss, I believe, to explain, upon the same principles, in what sense we are to understand the term when it is connected with the most expressive phrases, such as "the only begotten Son of God who was in the bosom of the Father;" the "beloved Son of God," and "dear Son of God, the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature," (John i. 14-18. Matthew iii. 17. Mark ix. 7; Luke ix. 35. Colossians i. 13-15.) There must be something surely peculiar in those instances, and different from the common acceptation of the phrase when conferred by way of eminence on particular persons or characters. But, added to these striking particularities, there are other corroborating circumstances, which put the matter beyond all doubt, and which I shall much wonder if the most extravagant latitude of construction can possibly do away.

If I can prove to your satisfaction that this distinguished title, by which Christ is every where, in the New Testament, called the Son of God, was not applied to him merely by his followers, but was the individual character by which his commission and authority were to be made known; that it was first declared by the angel in his address to Mary at the annunciation; afterwards assumed by our Lord himself at his entrance upon his public character; received the testimony, of

a voice from heaven, in confirmation of its truth, more than once, during our Lord's exercise of his ministry; and that even the spirits of darkness gave the same evidence to it: in short that this title uniformly characterized his person while he continued upon earth, and is the distinguishing name by which the apostles and inspired writers have revealed his doctrines to all ages of the church; and that these facts do not depend upon a single passage of a questionable sense or meaning, but that one invariable strain of testimony runs through the whole volume of Scripture. If, I say, I can shew this, I should hope it would be conclusive and satisfactory to every candid person. Permit me, therefore, to bring before you the several testimonies of this kind by which this leading proof of Christ's divinity is confirmed and assured.

The first instance is that of the angel in his salutation of Mary The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; THEREFORE that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God," (Luke i. .9,5.) Now here is an express and positive reason assigned why Jesus is called the Son of God: from the Holy Ghost coming upon Mary, and the power of the Highest overshadowing her; by which our blessed Lord, deriving his existence in the flesh from a Divine Power, and without the intervention of an human father, he was truly and properly called the Son of God. A circumstance evidently peculiar to Christ, and by which the title becomes applicable only to him. Had the conception not been miraculous, but the natural consequence of Mary's marriage with her husband, there could have been no reason given for this appellation. There is something also very remarkable in the angel's expression: he does not say in consequence of this overshadowing power of the Highest "the child" shall be called the Son of God, but "that holy thing;" there by drawing a striking distinction between the Word made flesh and the highest created being whatever.

The second proof I shall bring of Christ's exclusive claim to this title, personally considered, is the testimony of a voice from heaven, both at his baptism, and again at his transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," (Matthew iii. 17. xviii. 5: &c. Luke ix. 35. Mark ix.) This, also, I conceive to be another very striking discrimination between the ordinary custom observable among men, whereby eminent persons may be distinguished by eminent titles; and the authority of a voice from heaven, giving so extraordinary a demonstration of the dignity of him to whom it was applied. If it can be any where shewn, and in any one instance, that any individual among the sons of men ever received such a testimony from above, then this of Jesus at his baptism and transfiguration will by so much be lessened upon a comparison in its importance: but if not, and it be clearly proved that CHRIST and CHRIST only was so distinguished, it plainly follows, that there must have been something peculiar in his person and character, from his receiving such supernatural attestations of his dignity and consequence. For we may venture to ask, in the words of the apostle, "Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?" (Hebrews i. 5.)

But, thirdly, we have other testimony beside that of the angel, and a voice from above, for the spirits of darkness brought their unwilling evidence to the same great truth. Read only the latter part of the fourth chapter of the gospel by St. Luke, and then determine on what ground it is that Christ is called the Son of God. "And in the synagogue there was a man which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and he cried with a loud voice, saying, Let us alone, what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth; art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And devils also came out of many, crying out, and saying, Thou art Christ, the Son of God. And he, rebuking them, suffered them not to speak, for they knew that he was Christ," (Luke vi. 41. Mark v.) What

overpowering evidences are these collectively considered, that the appellation of this title given to Christ is peculiar and appropriate! How any man can possibly withhold his assent to the GODHEAD of JESUS, when even apostate spirits cannot refrain, is unaccountable and surprising.

When we add to these strong testimonies the further evidence, that our blessed Lord assumed this title himself, and founded his mission expressly upon it, because he was the Son of God; this at once determines the whole, by clearly shewing that it is on his own declarations we are authorized to apply the sacred appellation to him; and from hence we have reason also to infer, that the expression carries with it all the idea that we can entertain of a divine and eternal nature. It would be tedious to particularize every instance we meet with in the history of our blessed Lord of this kind, Let a few passages suffice.

Christ had healed a cripple on the Sabbath-day; for which the Jews sought to slay him; but Jesus answered them, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work;" therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because "he not only had broken the Sabbath, but had said also, that God was his Father, making himself equal with God," (John v. 17, 18.) A most positive proof this, that our blessed Lord assumed this title, and that the Jews understood it in the light of a claim and of equality with the Father, for which they were so exceedingly exasperated against him.

Sometime after this, in a conference which Christ held with the Jews, in which he declared his unity with the Father, "I and my Father are one," they took up stones again to stone him; but Jesus demanded the cause for which they did it; they replied, "for blasphemy, because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God," (John x. 30, 33.) Can any thing be more in point than this?

Again, upon a similar occasion, when Christ had opened the eyes of one that was born blind, and much altercation and dispute arose between the Jews and the man in consequence of it, which terminated in putting him out of the synagogue, our blessed Lord met his patient, and proposed to him this very question, "Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said, Thou hast both seen him, and he it is that talketh with thee. And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him," (John ix. 35-38.) Here is an evidence the most express, plain, and positive that can be, and attended also with the divine adoration of Jesus. Would Christ have assumed this title, and accepted homage and worship by virtue of it, had not both been his just right? Would not this meek and humble Saviour rather have corrected the errors of the man, and availed himself of so good an opportunity of renouncing such a title, and enjoining the worship of God only, had not his divinity been unquestionable, and his relationship to the Father fully clear and indisputable? Judge then on what dangerous ground those men tread, who step forward with so much confidence to rob the Son of God of his due, and endeavour to degrade the eternal Son of the Father to the condition of a poor being like ourselves! What a different opinion the apostle Peter had of his Master's real character, and what sentiments he entertained of our Lord's claim to this title, may easily be gathered from the expressions he made use of in his way to Caesarea Philippi. When Christ, in order to try their faith in him, proposed to his disciples this question, "Whom do men say that I, the Son of man am? They said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the Prophets." And when Christ desired to know what they thought of him, Peter, with his usual promptness, immediately cried out, "Thou art Christ the Son of the living God." Can any man suppose that this was said in compliment only? That Peter would say to a man like himself, Thou art Christ the Son of the living God? Is it

possible any one can adopt such opinion? and especially when it procured for him that glorious commendation, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven," (Matt. xvi. 13.) So far indeed was this from being a common compliment, used in courtesy to distinguish men, that Christ declared it to be a truth of that superlative nature, that human discernment was unequal to the discovery of it, and it could only be revealed by God the Father. The same divine truth, it may justly be said, operates in the present hour. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them, because they are spiriually discerned," (I Cor. ii. 14.)

I shall mention only one passage more, in confirmation of our Lord's assumption of this title; and that is the instance at his trial, when the high-priest demanded of Jesus, by a solemn adjuration, to tell him, "whether he were the Christ the Son of God," (Luke xxii. 70,) or as the equivalent phrase of another Evangelist expresses it, "Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mark xiv. 61). And on our Lord's declaring that he was, the high-priest rent his clothes, saying, he had spoken blasphemy. Would he have pronounce this blasphemy, if it had been considered as nothing more than a usual complimentary title given to remarkable, characters *ex officio*? Much less would he have declared Jesus deserving of death in consequence of it? Is it not self-evident, that the Jews considered the expression in the full sense and acceptation of the word; and which, of consequence, became blasphemy, if improperly assumed? And is it not equally clear that Christ laid down his life in support of his just pretensions to this title?

Such repeated proofs of the point in question, leave no room to doubt in what sense we are to consider Christ's assumption of his character, and what ideas we are to annex to this distinguished appellation. It must be plain to every candid and

unprejudiced mind, that the term made use of, when applied to the person of Jesus, differs most essentially when used in compliment to any other among the sons of men. And if we have authority to draw any inference from any one fact in the world, we may with the fullest safety conclude, from those instances, that our blessed Lord is, in the highest and most complete sense of the word, "the Son of God." Here the reasoning of the apostle is strictly applicable; "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater, and this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son," (John i. 5-9.)

It were unnecessary for me to go further, and enumerate the several passages we meet with in Scripture, in which Christ is particularly distinguished by this title among his apostles and followers. After the review already taken, and especially our Lord's own testimony on this point, it would, I think, be superfluous. Even what hath been now advanced on this subject, I would wish to be considered only as collateral to the main body of evidence which I purpose to bring forward in discussing the important question of our Lord's divinity.

I cannot but think the several circumstances I have laid before you, respecting the phrase itself when applied to our Saviour, are very striking and particular; but they are not so essential to our cause as to oblige us to lay the greatest stress upon them. The argument arising from hence, and much more, I think, we might with safety give up, and yet retain enough to prove the doctrine I am anxious to confirm in your minds.

The Godhead of Jesus is so conspicuous a feature in the gospel, and is supported by evidences which press upon us so closely on every side, that, I am sure, there is not any point of Christ's religion more capable of being clearly proved and ascertained, than his claim to a divine nature,

I should proceed immediately to the testimonies contained in Scripture of this great doctrine, but their importance demands a more full and particular discussion than your present attention will permit. I reserve them, therefore, for the subject of our next meeting. In the mean time, consider what hath been said, and may the Lord give you a right understanding in all thing.