

**UNITARIANISM UNTENABLE: A LETTER
ADDRESSED TO THE UNITARIANS OF
CHESTER, EDINBURGH AND NORWICH,
GREAT BRITAIN AND PITTSBURGH
AMERICA; AN APPENDIX**

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Unitarianism Untenable: A Letter Addressed to the Unitarians of Chester, Edinburgh and Norwich, Great Britain and Pittsburgh America; An Appendix by W. J. Bakewell

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W. J. BAKEWELL

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UNITARIANISM UNTENABLE.

A LETTER

ADDRESSED

TO THE UNITARIANS

OF

CHESTER, EDINBURGH AND NORWICH,

GREAT BRITAIN,

AND

PITTSBURGH, AMERICA;

BY

W. J. BAKEWELL,

THEIR FORMER PASTOR.

WITH

AN APPENDIX,

CONTAINING

SCRIPTURE TESTIMONY RESPECTING THE NATURE OF OUR SAVIOUR, THE
PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND THE DOCTRINE OF
CHRISTIAN REDEMPTION;

INTERSPERSED WITH REMARKS.

Pittsburgh, Pa.

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1843.

Received of the author

LETTER.

MY CHRISTIAN FRIENDS:—

Although the discontinuance of the pastoral relation which I sustained towards you, (and for more than ten years each at Chester and Norwich,) has deprived me of a claim upon your attention to the letter which I now address to you, yet, judging from my experience of the seriousness and candor with which you listened to my professional addresses, I am encouraged to hope that you will not disregard this communication, which is dictated by a sense of duty. The affectionate kindness I have received from all my congregations, and more particularly from you, my English friends, during my ministry, and the substantial proof which you gave me of your attachment, before I bade you farewell, are too deeply impressed on my heart ever to be obliterated. Many, indeed, of my much respected and beloved friends are removed from this scene of discipline, but their virtues yet speak to those who knew them well. With respect to you, whose race is not yet run, the interposition of the waves of the Atlantic has not broken asunder the ties of affectionate regard, nor shall I ever cease to feel a lively interest in your temporal and spiritual welfare. Permit me, therefore, to request that you will favor me with your serious attention, whilst I, as briefly as possible, unfold to you the complete and important change which my religious principles have undergone; and state, as far as I am able, the causes which have operated to effect it.

I have, as you know, never hesitated to declare to you what I believed to be the truth as it is in Jesus; and I have delivered, on several occasions, controversial lectures in opposition to what appeared to me to be the prevailing errors of the Christian world. I have never dreaded to encounter any obloquy in the discharge of the duties of my ministry; but, never having felt, I never expressed any uncharitable sentiment towards those who most widely differed from me; and I do not know that I was ever assailed by any opprobrious epithet, or ever injured myself in the estimation of the most orthodox, by fearlessly declaring what I believed to be the counsel of God. The sincerity of my motives was not questioned by the Trinitarian community; and I expect, and fully believe, that you, my Christian friends in England, who have had ample opportunities of studying my character, will do me the same justice, now that I have set myself in opposition to the doctrines which you maintain—doctrines which I have for

more than a quarter of a century strenuously, but, I thank God, unsuccessfully inculcated. Indeed, I do not know that all the controversial lectures which I have delivered, have made a single convert to Unitarianism. I cannot think it possible that you, my English friends, will suspect the purity of my motives on leaving a denomination every where spoken against, for one to which no worldly opprobrium is attached. I have, hitherto, maintained a blameless reputation; and the Searcher of hearts alone is entitled to judge my motives; and if I stand acquitted by Him of any interested bias, I shall not deeply feel the insinuations or reproaches of man, under the conviction, that no one has any just cause to suspect me of regarding the opinion of the world above the testimony of my conscience.

But to those whose bigotry, or indifference to all religion, may deem me a mercenary apostate, I may be permitted to say, that I can scarcely expect to receive greater patronage from a liberal public than I have hitherto experienced. I resigned my pastoral charge of the Chester and Edinburgh congregations much to your expressed, and, I have no doubt, sincere regret; and I voluntarily relinquished the pastorship of the Norwich Unitarian Society with the most gratifying marks of respect and attachment, to emigrate to this land of liberty, with the sole object of enabling my children to work out for themselves a more honorable and independent maintenance than I thought, and still think, they could obtain in England. I considered that our means were sufficient to procure all the present comforts of life, and my anxiety was for the welfare of my children. Unexpected losses have rendered my own active exertions necessary; but I should despise myself beyond expression, if I thought I could be influenced by any pecuniary considerations to make an unrighteous profession of any sentiment or doctrine which I do not sincerely believe; and I do not hesitate to declare that my past life will not authorize any one to presume to insinuate that I am sunk so low, and become so base, as to sacrifice principle on the altar of expediency. My School has received, notwithstanding my published opposition to the doctrines of Trinitarianism, an encouragement beyond my expectations, and equal to my wishes. For this support, I make a sincere tender of my gratitude to a most liberal community. I have deemed it right to myself to say thus much of my own private affairs. My letter may probably be read by others, who may not feel any interest in my individual concerns, but it is written more particularly for you, my much valued friends, in England.

But now let me proceed to the express object of this letter. Last October, I resigned my charge of the Unitarian Church at Pittsburgh, not because any dissatisfaction was expressed with myself or my services, but in consequence of the decreasing state of the little society, and my persuasion, that after the unsuccessful efforts for many years to raise a con-

gregation, no advantage to the cause of Unitarianism could arise from continuing any longer the ineffectual struggle against the overwhelming opinions and efforts of the orthodox population. I was disposed to think that our cause might be better promoted by our quietly mingling with the Christian public, and trusting to the silent operation of truth. And I am fully persuaded, that the controversional mode of propagating opinions is not the most successful; and that although it is the duty of a Christian minister to state and defend what he believes to be the truth before his own congregation, the assumption of an agonistical attitude is not adapted to produce a favorable impression on the mind of the unbeliever.

Sensible of the great importance of public worship, and deeming it to be my duty to accompany my family to the house of God, I was not long in selecting, amongst many denominations, that form of worship which would best accord with my feelings. The beautiful liturgy of the English Episcopal Church, which I have long admired, determined my choice. I remember the time when my prejudices were so strong against the Church of England, that I would rather have deprived myself of the inestimable blessings of public worship than attend its service; but time, which ripens the most acid fruit, gradually mellows the crude opinions of early life. I, indeed, was always disposed to acknowledge that the Church of England has produced some of the greatest, wisest, and most pious men that have enlightened the Christian world; and I am now persuaded, that to this Church the nation is indebted for its long career of glory, in arts, literature and arms; for its substantial prosperity, which cannot be undermined by the conflicting elements of political agitation; and for the rich streams of learning, good sense, and real religion which permeate the length and breadth of the land, which fertilize and enrich the moral soil, and diffuse in every direction, the healthful blessings of rational and spiritual life. The citizens of the land of my adoption will not look unkindly upon me for this expression of my feelings to the land of my birth. Never, in all probability, shall I again see the cliffs of Albion, which I sailed past with feelings not to be uttered; but should unexpected circumstances take me to its shores once more, how eagerly should I look out for the ivy-mantled towers of its country churches! and with what altered emotions should I enter again its sublime and venerable cathedrals!

From the first Sunday of my attendance at the Episcopal Church, I was much impressed with the whole service, though several portions of the liturgy, more particularly of the litany, were offensive to me; yet I do not know that I ever experienced in a place of worship more of what I believe to be the spirit of devotion. By degrees, the parts that were exceptionable to me became less and less matter of offence; my admiration of the service increased; and, at last, I could cordially respond to every petition.

You may imagine that my principles were regulated by my feelings, and that the important change was the effect of sympathy; but this was not the case: the understanding was during the whole time engaged in serious examination. Long before I resigned my last pastoral charge, I had often reflected with no little perplexity on the present state of Unitarianism, and the little success which has attended all the means which have been taken, in this country and in England, for the dissemination of its doctrines. And after I had ceased to officiate in the pulpit, my perplexity increased. In England, except where a popular preacher attracts, the Unitarian congregations have been for many years decreasing, and in many places the chapels are nearly empty. To adopt an expression some where used by Dr. Chalmers, "they are rapidly dwindling from observation." Before I left my native land, I was encouraged by the flattering accounts which we received of the progress of Unitarianism in America. I knew that at Boston there were more than twelve Unitarian Churches, and heard of its very extensive and irresistible progress in the west. A residence of a few years in this country, has fully convinced me of the erroneous impression which exists on this subject in England. One or two congregations, indeed, may be brought forward which have increased of late, but others have diminished, I am led to believe, from what I have seen, heard and read, in greater proportion; and the wild notions that many Unitarians have lately adopted, will not advance the cause.

I began more and more to reflect on the extraordinary position of Unitarianism in this age of inquiry, in which the schoolmaster is said to be effecting an important change in the mental condition of the community. When in England, I regarded the established church as the great obstacle to the progress of Christian truth, and fully believed that in this country Unitarian Christianity would rapidly spread. But I now find that even here, where all denominations are on a footing of equality, Unitarians preach and publish without producing any sensible effect on the public mind. Is ours, I occasionally reflected, that Gospel preached with so much success in the apostolic age, which neither the poor, nor even the rich, will now receive. I knew not how to reconcile the repugnance with which it is generally regarded, with the conviction that it is the truth as it is in Jesus; and I sometimes said to myself, there is another Gospel which is every where acceptable, which is received as glad tidings of great joy, which warms the heart, enlightens the understanding, incites to active exertions in the cause of humanity, sends forth missionaries to the arctic regions and the torrid zone, and raises the brutal sensualist and cannibal savage from the depths of human wretchedness and degradation, and galling slavery, to the glorious liberty of the children of God. Not a little impressed with these reflections, I determined to sit down to the study of the New Testament alone, without the aid of any commentary;

and as much as possible, without any reference to any creeds or doctrines maintained by any denomination. I resolved to search the Scriptures on the principle enforced by Dr. Chalmers in his evidences: "not what thinkest thou; but how readest thou." Endeavoring to cast out all previous conceptions, I began to read the words of our Lord and his Apostles, as I would any other book filled with important information, to ascertain the sentiments therein contained.

Let me observe, that my collegiate education had been conducted on a different principle. I had first studied the Evidences of Natural Religion; and having formed and settled my notions of the person, attributes, and government of the Deity from books professing to elucidate the Light of Nature, I was then conducted to the examination of the Scriptures. With a system already formed, with a mind pre-occupied with the speculations of natural theologians, I proceeded to read the Bible. "Instead of learning the designs and character of the Almighty," (to use the words of Dr. Chalmers), "from his own mouth, I sat in judgment upon them, and made the conjectures of what they should be, take the precedency of his revelation of what they are." And thus it was that I embraced Unitarianism, and thus have I continued to read the Bible almost up to the present time.

But having determined to take the Word of God as its own expositor—to ask myself perpetually "what readest thou?" I began to admit, that there were many passages which seemed to favor principles different from those which I professed. I was again and again surprised at the apparent evidence for doctrines which I had been accustomed to regard as corruptions of Christianity. The commentators that I had generally consulted told me that this language was figurative. Every expression relating to the Divinity of our Lord's nature, to the meritorious efficacy of the sufferings, blood, and death of Christ, was pronounced metaphorical. Such passages as the following, "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world"—"He came to give his life a ransom for many"—"God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins"—"The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin"—"Ye were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish or without spot—who of his own self bear our sins in his own body on the tree—by whose stripes ye were healed"—"Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred"—"If the blood of bulls and goats sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who, through the Eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God, purge your consciences from dead works to serve the living God"—such passages as these, I had been led to consider as figurative allusions to the sacrificial rites of the Old Testament dispensation; and, by some means, contrived to pay no attention to the express declaration of St. Paul, that "The law is a shadow of things to come." But I began to perceive that this

system of interpretation was not doing justice to the explicit and often repeated statement of Revelation. I found in all the gospels, in the Acts, in almost all the Epistles, and in the Revelation of St. John, testimony upon testimony to the effect of the death of Christ in removing the penalty of sin. Is it not, I began to reflect, explicitly stated, that "Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." "That Christ our passover is slain for us?" Can these expressions, and many more, repeated again and again, all be figurative allusions to the legal sacrifices? I was much perplexed. But when the Book was closed, my long established opinions seemed to derive support from what I regarded as the dictates of reason. The examination was renewed at my next leisure hours, and again the word of God, being studied on the principle of "How readest thou" spoke to my troubled mind. The language I acknowledged meant something; and in reading the Epistle to the Hebrews, I came to passage upon passage declaring, that "Christ was offered to bear the sins of many;" "that he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself;" "that the Lord Jesus was the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the everlasting covenant." To the authority of this epistle, I had previously paid very little attention, having taken up the notion that it was not written by the Apostle Paul. In the Improved Version, it is arranged under one of the disputed books; but I am now convinced that the very difficult passages on the Unitarian scheme which it contains, were the real, though unsuspected, cause of my doubting its genuineness. The principal objection urged, seems to be that its style is more elegant than that of the other Epistles: an objection which scarcely deserves consideration after the early testimony to its canonical authority; and which, if true, is satisfactorily answered by the assertion of some of the Fathers, that it was written by the Apostle in Hebrew, and translated at a very early period into Greek. Convinced by studying Lardner's chapter on this work, that it is entitled to the place which it holds in the New Testament, I could not any longer hesitate to admit that the doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice of Christ is taught in this letter. I turned again to the other books of the New Covenant, and perceived that they all unite in bearing testimony, "that Christ has redeemed us to God by his blood." At length, I referred to the liii. chapter of Isaiah, and there also I found it written, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed;" "he was numbered with the transgressors, and he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." I could no longer resist the conclusion, that the doctrine of the Atonement is the doctrine of Scripture.

Particularly impressed with this prophecy, I now turned to other passages of the Old Testament, to which our Lord and his Apostles referred,