

**LETTERS TO THE REV. PROFESSOR
STUART: COMPRISING REMARKS ON
HIS ESSAY ON SIN, PUBLISHED IN THE
AMERICAN BIBLICAL REPOSITORY
FOR APRIL AND JULY, 1839**

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Letters to the Rev. Professor Stuart: Comprising Remarks on His Essay on Sin, Published in the American Biblical Repository for April and July, 1839 by Daniel Dana

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DANIEL DANA

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Miscellaneous pamph.
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LETTERS

TO THE



REV. PROFESSOR STUART,

CONTAINING

REMARKS ON HIS ESSAY ON SIN,

PUBLISHED IN THE

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BY DANIEL DANA, D. D.

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LETTER I.

INTRODUCTION.—THE POINT IN DEBATE EXPLICITLY STATED.—

PLAN OF DISCUSSION.

REV. AND DEAR SIR,

I have perused and re-perused, with much care, your *Essay on Sin*, in both its parts; together with the letter of explanation with which you have favored me. I now sit down, agreeably to my promise, to offer some comments. To this task I come with unaffected reluctance. To find myself in conflict with a beloved and honored Professor in that sacred Seminary with which, from the first, I have held a responsible connection; and this, too, on points which, on all reflection, I cannot but view as fundamental and vital, gives me more pain than I can possibly describe. Nothing, let me aver, but the interests of sacred truth, and the imperious demands of apprehended duty, could possibly reconcile me to such a position.

I begin by repeating my thanks for your kind and candid reception of my first letter, plain and unceremonious as it was. This kindness of yours combines with a thousand other considerations, to inculcate a similar spirit on myself. Indeed, every feeling of my heart recoils from the thought of unkindness to a

Christian brother, long loved and valued; while fidelity to the truth bids me treat his statements and reasonings with the utmost freedom.

The object of your Essay seems to be, to disprove and explode the doctrine of *original sin*, or of *native depravity*; taking these terms in their ordinarily received, and well understood sense. It is true, that you occasionally employ expressions which, taken by themselves, might be viewed as not materially exceptionable, by the friends of the doctrine in question. But I appreciate too highly your independence and integrity, to suspect that you intend to be equivocal. There is an affluence in the English language which supplies appropriate terms for all our ideas; and of this affluence you are amply possessed. When you intimate an opinion that the whole debate may be resolved into a difference in *terminology*, I can only express my surprise; or rather I can only avow a surprise which it is out of my power to express.

If, in the remarks which I shall offer on your theory, I shall make it appear that the philosophic principle on which it is built, is erroneous—that the celebrated author whose support it claims, gives it no support at all—that the theory itself is in conflict with the scriptures—that it is inconsistent with your own repeated admissions and statements—and finally, that it stands opposed to your publicly avowed opinions; you will doubtless admit that it should be abandoned. On the points thus indicated, I will venture no confident promises. All I ask is, to be favored, in this discussion, with the candid attention, and the critical scrutiny, of yourself, and of my readers at large.

LETTER II.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE THEORY IN QUESTION.

REV. AND DEAR SIR,

Your denial of the doctrine of *original sin* is based on the apprehended fact, that *all sin consists in voluntary transgression of known law, and in nothing else*; in a word, that properly speaking, *there is no other sin beside actual sin*. Thus you

would seem to exclude *propensities, dispositions, habits*, from the possession of any moral character whatever.

Here I observe that your error, if it is an error, is, in strictness of speech, philosophic, rather than theological. And this circumstance gives me leave to remark on the infinite danger of introducing into religious subjects, philosophic principles which are in the least degree doubtful. Here, for instance, is a very simple, and, as some would think, a very innocent maxim; that *all sin consists in action*. And yet this maxim, so simple and so innocent, is made a lever by which to overturn a great doctrine of the gospel which the Christian church has, from the first, regarded as not only unquestionable in its evidence, but as lying at the foundation of the whole system of religion, theoretic and practical.

Permit me another remark. When we undertake to philosophize in religion, the utmost caution is needful. Shall we assume a philosophical dogma, and make the scripture bend to it? Or shall we not rather take our stand by the sacred oracle, and modestly consent that all our preconceived philosophical notions shall bow and fall before it? In other words, shall we confidently determine for ourselves what the Bible *ought* to say; or shall we humbly inquire what it has actually said?

Excuse me, my dear Sir, in declaring my apprehension, that to an error in this very point, are to be traced the perplexities and disputes which have recently infested the church on the subject of *original sin*. The doctrine, it is assumed by its opposers, is at war with the *philosophy of the human mind*. It cannot therefore be found in the Bible; and whoever undertakes to defend it, must do it at the expense of his reputation for scholarship and philosophy. It is but too true, that the church does not abound with those heroic spirits that can encounter a peril like this.

I readily, indeed, admit that if you can satisfactorily establish the theory, that *all sin consists in action*, you effectually subvert the doctrine of original or native depravity. And from this fact, I infer with confidence, that the theory is untenable and false, since the doctrine is found in the Bible; intimately wrought into its whole system, and constantly meeting us on its very face.

But I will not stop here. I unhesitatingly join issue with you on the philosophic point in question, and will give it a momentary discussion.

And here let me inquire: In estimating the characters of men, do we regard their actions merely; or do we search for some-

thing beyond—their dispositions, their propensities, their habits, their *governing principles* of action? Unquestionably the last. Actions are of no farther importance than as they indicate and determine the principles from which they spring. It is *principles*, then, and not *actions*, which give the decisive stamp of character.

Will you say, that these principles belong to the class of voluntary action? In this case, you touch the very core of the difficulty, and furnish the means of its solution. No one will contend that pride and humility, that generosity and meanness, that benevolence and selfishness, are *actions*. They are *principles* of action. And to prove that this is their distinctive and simple character, it is needful only to remark that they exist and remain, when the action to which they naturally give birth, is entirely suspended. The generous man cannot always be performing generous actions. But he is not the less a generous man still. Surely, my dear Sir, you will not contend that the Christian ceases to be a Christian, whenever the *exercise* of grace is suspended. No. The principle of grace remains. It is enduring and imperishable. And what is the inference? Neither holiness nor sin consists exclusively in action.

While discussing the philosophy of your scheme, I must advert to another point. In explaining the actual sinfulness of human beings, you trace it to certain native *susceptibilities*; a term which you abundantly employ, and which I cannot but wish you had explained. Concerning these susceptibilities you declare that they are *adapted to lead and excite us to sin*, (p. 52.) You even declare that they *certainly lead to sin, and only to sin*, (p. 44.) Yet these susceptibilities, you strenuously contend, are *innocent—altogether innocent*. Here, your common-sense readers are much perplexed, and ask to be enlightened. That a *disposition to commit sin* is a *sinful disposition*, they perfectly understand. They were taught it in the nursery. The lesson they can never forget, nor renounce. But how susceptibilities altogether *innocent* should *tend to sin*, and even *certainly lead to it*, puzzles them extremely. Yet this is the vital principle, the grand support, of your theory. Take it away, and the whole fabric falls at once. I am constrained to add, that while it remains, it will press on your system, like an *incubus*, fatal to its energies, and ultimately fatal to its existence.

LETTER III.

VITRINGA.

REV. AND DEAR SIR,

You have introduced into your Essay, several passages translated from Vitringa; and this mainly, it should seem, for the purpose of proving that all sin consists in action. Will you excuse me in remarking that the passages introduced afford your theory not the shadow of support; and that on the principal point attempted to be proved, your favorite author abandons; and even contradicts you? Vitringa recognizes and ratifies the distinction between the *habit* of sin, which he denominates *vitium*, and the *act*, which he styles *peccatum*. And he expressly declares that "*habitual* sin, in the order of nature and time, *precedes* sin in the *action*." On these views of Vitringa, you remark that his "*vitium* appears to be nothing more nor less than the frequently repeated, i. e. habitual desire to sin, which leads to the commission of what he calls *sinful acts*." You afterward declare that "nothing will be found plainer or more certain, than that his *vitium* is as really a transgression of the divine law (and of course an *act* of the mind) as his *peccatum*."

How then stands the case? You quote a writer as of high and commanding authority, to prove a favorite point. Having quoted, you *contradict* him, as not understanding the meaning of his own terms. And in virtue of this contradiction, you claim his support in behalf of the very theory which he rejects! I feel myself, then, not only warranted, but constrained to add, that the statement of Vitringa, far from proving that all sin consists in action, proves directly the reverse. Indeed, he asserts, in so many words, and this, in the very face of your theory, that "all sin is *not act*. Neglect of duty is sin." Such being literally the state of facts, I cannot help imagining that I see the venerable Dutchman smile (not to say *frown*) at your attempt to enlist him in such a cause.

I have not Vitringa at hand; and I sincerely regret that I have not. Yet I cannot withhold one additional remark. Should any inference be drawn from your quotations and comments, that this celebrated author espouses and defends the modern