

THE LANGUAGE OF THE FATHER'S DISPENSATION

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CHAPTER XI THE LANGUAGE OF THE FATHER'S DISPENSATION

Thus speaks the Dispensation of the Father. "The living God is the Saviour of all man (especially of those that believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ) 1 Tim IV.10 He hath made of one blood all nations of men, that they should seek him, if they might feel after Him, and find Him, tho' he be not far from every one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being; we are his offspring: Act. XVII.26, 29. And therefore his grace, that bringeth salvation, hath like the light of the Sun] appeared to all men [in different degrees of cleanness and energy] teaching us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world: Tit. II.11. § O man, God hath shewed thee what is good: And what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God: Mich VI.8. Fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart; for consider how great things he hath done for you; but if ye will do wickedly, ye shall be consumed: 1 Sam. XII.25. Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Mat. VII.12. § God (as a Judge), is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness is accepted with him: Acts. X. 34.—By faith Enoch pleased God, But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God, must believe that God exists, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him: Heb. XI.6.—God will render to every man according to his deeds, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that does evil, but honour and glory to every man that worketh good; for there is no respect of persons with God: As many as have sinned without the (written) law, shall also perish without the [written] law: for when the Gentiles, who have not the (written) law, do by nature the things contained in the law, they shew that the law is

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written in their hearts; their conscience bearing them witness (of what is right or wrong;) Rom. ii.6,15"

This language can be understood by heathens and children. St. Paul spoke it when he addressed proud Philosophers at Athens; when he stopt blind idolaters at Lystra; and when, reasoning of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, he made wicked Felix tremble at the thought of the great Judge.

CHAPTER XII

I. It will render the capital doctrine of the new-birth much plainer, by resting it more fully upon its rational and scriptural basis. And it will in particular restore the new-birth of the Spirit to its original dignity, and guard the Power of Godliness against the attacks of antinomianism in all its shapes. Should the birth of the Spirit be again sought and attained by professors, the reproach of Christianity would soon be rolled away: Our holy religion would once more be a praise in the earth: And our light [should I not say our smoking flax] rekindled by the baptism of fire, would shine so bright before men, that the fulness of the gentiles would come in, and Jewish obstinacy would yield to convincing power and to and converting grace.

III. It will prevent our leaning to absolute reprobation and Popish bigotry. "There is no salvation now but in the pale of the Church," says a reprobating Papist on the next assertion we may expect to hear from him, is that there is no true Church but his own, which I wish that no protestants had brought this monstrous notion along with them from the Church of Rome. But it is too well known, that some good men, who think themselves at the greatest distance from popery, are in love with a mistake, which differs but little from the Popish tenet which I now explode. How shall Papists and Protestants be cured of notions, which have confirmed so many infidels in the unjust supposition, that Christianity is a religion naturally productive of reprobating tempers, and persecutions, and horrible massacres? Only bring out the light, which springs from the doctrine of the various dispensations of divine grace, and the dismal darkness of reprobation will vanish. Shew that all men are under the dispensation of the Father; that there is salvation under this dispensation; that as God had formerly children among the gentiles, as well as among the Jews; so he has now sons and daughters among the heathens, as well as among the Christians. Give the doctrine of the new birth its evangelical latitude, and your Gospel-net will sweep the whole earth, and bring from the east and from the west, souls that fear God, and with whom Abraham himself will not disdain to feast in heaven, altho' our reprobating pride will not even allow them a possibility to escape everlasting fire.

IV. It will help the children of God, in their several classes, to know exactly where they are; which will keep some from sinking into despair, because they have not the marks of those who are in the highest class, and will prevent others from thinking of themselves more highly than they ought to do. None can tell how many sincere souls of corresponding cast, are rack'd with unreasonable doubts about God's mercy; supposing that he has shut up his loving kindness in a pleasure, and will be no more intreated for them. And it is hard illelegible word at the vast number of professors of an opposite turn, who are misled by a by a forward spirit into a conceit, that

they are completely born of God, and immovably the fullest dispensation of the gospel; when they hardly stand their ground in the dispensation of the Father. The only way to cheer the drooping spirits of the former, is to let them have the comfort, which belongs to their dispensation, as the angel and Peter did to Cornelius, and his devout friends. And the only method of curing the latter of their presumption, is to convince them, that so far from being firmly established in the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, they have not yet attained the fear of God, which impressed the heart of Cornelius, a penitent soldier under the dispensation of the Father.

V. It will help ministers to know where their people are, to propose with becoming assurance the important question, which St. Paul asked of the professors, whom he met with at Ephesus, Act. XIX.2; to give them proper reproofs, encouragement, and directions; and to pray for them, and with them, in a truly evangelical manner. Nor afraid to assert, that so long as a pastor continues a stranger to the doctrine of the various dispensations of divine grace, he can no more properly direct a number of consciences, than a shoemaker can properly serve a number of customers, if he has but one last in his shop and makes all their shoes by one and the same measure.

VI. It will help us to profit under every minister, "This is impossible" Isays one, who advances towards the dispensation of the Spirit: I "The preacher I hear, preaches only justification by faith in Christ. He seldom says any thing about the Spirit, unless when he observes that we cannot repent and believe in Christ without the Spirit's assistance." You mean, that he leads you no farther than the dispensation of the Son: But is not this a glorious dispensation? Do you enjoy all its privileges? And can you say with Thomas and Peter, My Lord and my God, Thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee, and that I have left all to follow thee? If you have not yet attained to this loving faith in Christ, you have not yet reaped all the benefit you may reap by a gospel-minister under the dispensation of the Son.—"Oh but the minister of our parish, does not go so far as this Isays one who believes in Christ: I wish he were as advanced in grace as Apollos: but alas! He preaches only the fear of God, repentance, a decent attendance on divine worship, strict honesty, benevolence, and good works. In short he leads us no farther than the dispensation of the Father." Nay, well if you stand in this dispensation without spot and blameless: It is well if at all times you fear God and work righteousness, because you believe that God is a gracious rewarder of those who diligently seek him. But if you have not attained even to this, say no more, that you cannot profit under your minister: Candidly hear him rather than forsake the public worship of Almighty God. And dare not ridicule a preacher of moral righteousness, lest you should be found a despiser of the Father, and his dispensation.

VII. It will enable professors, who live in places where they can have their choice of many preachers, to prefer those who preach the whole gospel, to those who preach only one or two dispensations. We ought not to despise a minister, who preaches on the righteousness of the Father's dispensation or the righteousness of the Son's dispensation: but if we can hear one who over and above, points out to us righteousness in the Holy Ghost, we ought to prefer his preaching, because he does not shun to declare the whole counsel and kingdom of God.

VIII. It will help us to grow in grace by making us go from faith to faith, till faith is turned to sight. God calls us to follow Christ thro' the regeneration till we enter the third heaven. That we may do this, he has given us the gospel ladder: The various dispensations of his grace, are the steps of this divine ladder. And by these steps we may safely and comfortably rise, till we reach the heaven of heavens. But if the ladder be broken, and if partial divines think it their duty to spoil it, some by cutting off the lowest steps, and others by destroying the middle ones, whilst others frighten the people who are halfway up the ladder by crying to them, that the highest steps are all rotten, that if they continue to ascend they will have a dreadful fall, and that they may now safely take their rest because some divines have tied a label about the middle of the ladder, with this inscription, Finished salvation:—if this be the case, I say, who does not see, that going up the gospel-ladder, when the steps of the dispensations are thus broken, or displaced, must prove a task as difficult as it is dangerous; and that when all the steps of the ladder are fixed in their proper places, the ascent to the third heaven is both safe and practicable.

§ I am of a different opinion, (says an objector:) For it appears to me that preaching the lowest dispensations, is only tempting people to rest before they have attained the highest." I reply: (1) The consequence has no necessary connexion with our doctrine. How ridiculous would a man make himself if he asserted, that when soldiers are scaling a rampart, that affording them the use of the lower steps of the ladders, will only make them rest at the foot of the wall?—(2) We are bound to preach the gospel in its extent and its purity. And if the doctrine of the dispensations is an important part of the gospel, those who are afraid to preach it, are afraid of doing their bounden duty.—(3) As we should not do evil that good may come: So we should not neglect our duty, lest evil should follow.—(4) Our Lord and his apostles were strangers to our modern refinements: for they boldly preached the doctrine of the dispensations, without paying the least regard to the fears, which the objector expresses. And therefore, refusing to imitate them is not true wisdom; but worldly prudence, and a conceit, that we excel Christ himself in evangelical care and circumspection.

IX. It will make way for a reconciliation between the Perfectionists and the Imperfectionists, by softening their prejudices against each other, and shewing that each party holds a part of the truth. The question about which they principally divide, is, Whether the description of the carnal man mentioned in Rom. VII. 14, &c. who thanks God thro' Jesus Christ for his future deliverance, is the description of a believing lew, or that of a believing Christian. The Perfectionists strongly maintain the former sentiment; and the Imperfectionists as strongly contend for the latter. Now you may easily reconcile them by the doctrine of the dispensations. You may grant to the Imperfectionists, that the carnal man mention'd by St. Paul in that deep chapter, is an imperfect, Christian believer, that is, a believer under the dispensation of the Son:—such a carnal believer as might rank with Peter, James and John, when they would call for fire from heaven to consume their adversaries; or when they forsook Christ, and fled at the prospect of danger and reproach. And you may grant to the Perfectionists, that the Apostle's carnal man, is not under the dispensation of the Holy Ghost; for being still carnal and sold under sin, he can by no means rank yet with Christ's spiritu.

al men, who are anointed kings unto God with the Holy Ghost and with power. All those who live in the kingdom of God, enjoy the glorious liberty of God's children, who are born again according to the dispensation of the Spirit: Nor do they say any more, I am carnal, and sold under sin: The Lord hath turned their spiritual captivity, and put a new song in their mouths, as well as a new manifestation of the Spirit in their hearts. They can sing the Song of the Lamb, as well as the Songs of Moses and Zacharias: For they can say, We have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear, but have received the Spirit of adoption and liberty, the Spirit of a sound mind, of power, and love, which casteth out fear. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, hath made us free from the law of sin and death, and consequently from the bondage of fear, unbelief, and doubting. Thus by properly considering the difference between the dispensation of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, you can easily reconcile Rom. VII with Rom. VIII, and candid Imperfectionists with candid Perfectionists.

X. As the doctrine of the new birth laid down in these sheets allows the gospel-net its scripture-length; so it gives it its proper depth and strength. With this divine net you may draw souls quite out of the Stygian lake of sin and unbelief, into the limpid streams of Christian holiness and perfection, and make them understand the full meaning of St. John, when he says, Whosoever is born of God (according to the full dispensation of the Spirit) does not commit sin: for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin: because he is (thus) born of God. The doctrine of Christian perfection when rested upon the dispensation of the Holy Ghost as on its proper basis, stands with a firmness, which will defy the arguments and objections of the most subtle imperfectionists. And good men, who thro' mistake have ridiculed that important doctrine, will, upon better information, be afraid of doing it again, lest they should be found to cast the dirt of their invectives into the Holy of Holies, and to sin against the Holy Ghost, in attacking his peculiar dispensation. If pious Calvinists in particular looked at the doctrine of Perfection thro' the scripture-glass, which these sheets contain, their prejudice would probably abate, if it did not entirely subside.

XI. It will help us to solve the deep question: Is the grace of repentance, justification, and sanctification, given in an instantaneous, or gradual manner? For, as in the natural birth, nativity is instantaneous; that is, there is a moment, in which it can be said of a child, that he is not yet born, and a moment when it can be said, that he is born: and as this moment is preceded by a gradual growth in the womb, and followed by a gradual growth out of the womb: So it is in every spiritual change we undergo. Our entering into the dispensation of the Son, or that of the Holy Ghost, is instantaneous: for there is a moment, in which it can be said, Such a man has not received Christ since he was convinced of sin—such a woman has not received the Holy Ghost since she believed: And there is a happy moment when it can be said, Such a man has received Christ by faith since he repented: Such a woman has received the Holy Ghost by faith since she believed: But in both cases, when there is no miscarriage, and all goes well, the spiritual birth is preceded by a growing conviction of the importance of the blessing which we want, and followed by a growing acquaintance with the blessing, which we have received, till our whole soul is tinctured with it, and we are ready for an higher dispensation.

XII. It will reconcile our pious preachers and shew they agree with themselves, and throw much light upon the various parts of their discourses and publications. If there is but one dispensation of wrath, why so many different addresses to various sorts of sinners? And if there is but one dispensation of grace, why such a diversity of applications, to various classes of professors? Does this agree with the modern doctrines of finished damnation and finished salvation? Without the clue of the dispensations, you will never see the propriety and connexion of all the parts, which compose the system of gospel truth. Take one instance from the first book I lay my hands on. It is Mr. Wesley's first volume of sermons. Read the discourse which he calls The almost Christian, and that which is entitled Scriptural Christianity; and if you do not see the difference between ante-pentecostal and Pentecostal Christianity, or which is the same thing between the dispensation of the Son and that of the Holy Ghost, you will not understand what you read, or you will condemn the Preacher as an injudicious and uncharitable man, who puzzles people with needless and mischievous distinctions. The same observation is applicable to those parts of his sermons, where he speaks of some who, though born of God are full of indwelling sin, and of others who are so born of God as to be full of pure and humble love. Nor is it Mr. Wesley's works alone, which must be read in the light of this doctrine, to be properly understood. It would be easy to produce passages from our other pious authors, such as Mr. Whitefield, Mr. Venn, Mr. Romaine, which cannot be properly reconciled, without the help of the distinctions which I contend for.

XIII. It will prevent many scandalous controversies among Christians. If the persons, who are offended, when they hear it hinted, that serious, benevolent heathens may be in a state of salvation grace;—if these persons, I say, were acquainted with the doctrine of the dispensations, they would not be so ready to enter the lists of dispute to prove, that there cannot be salvation for sincere heathens under the dispensation of the Father, as well as for sincere Christians under the dispensation of the Son.

XIV. It will put an end to the controversy about election and predestination; a mischievous controversy, which continues to tear the bosom of the Church of Rome, and of all the Protestant churches. The proof of this assertion will be seen in a twofold Essay on Election, in which the difficulties attending that deep doctrine, are solved chiefly by means of the doctrine of the dispensations.

XV. It will terminate the obstinate dispute, which is carried on between the Church of England, and the society of the People called Quakers, concerning baptism. We contend for Christ's water-baptism, and the Quakers for the baptism of the Spirit. But the contention will be at an end, if the Quakers allow us that the Son has his peculiar dispensation, which is sealed by a baptism of water; and if we grant them, that the Holy Ghost has his special dispensation, which is sealed by a baptism of fire.

XVI. It will help us to understand many parts of the scripture which seem very hard, if not quite unintelligible, or contradictory without it. Take two or three instances by way of specimen.—Our Lord says: No man cometh unto me, except the Father draw him.—Fear not, little flock, for it is my Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. The meaning is, As the Father has drawn you by his dispensation to mine, and you continue to take me for your Shepherd; doubt not, little flock, but you

shall rise to the dispensation of the Spirit; for it is my Father's good pleasure, as well as mine, to bestow the kingdom upon you; or, which is the same thing, to give you righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost; here on earth, and eternal glory hereafter in heaven.—Again: Christ says in one place, Blessed are they that thirst, And in another place he says, Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. The meaning is, Blessed are the dry, barren souls under my Father's dispensation and mine, who thirst after the righteousness, peace and joy, which refresh the souls who enter into the kingdom [or dispensation] of the Holy Ghost. For when I shall have baptized them with the Spirit, they shall never thirst in the uneasy and painful manner, in which they thirst now. They shall drink as well as thirst: For the Spirit, that I shall give them, shall be in them a well of water springing up into everlasting life.—They shall not only be refreshed themselves; but rivers of living water shall flow out of them to refresh others, who shall be comforted by the comfort wherewith these fathers in Christ are comforted of God.—Once more: If the light is little under the dispensation of the Father, greater under that of the Son, and greatest under that of the Holy Ghost; it follows, that to sin against the law of the Father is bad; that to sin against the law of the Son is worse; and that to sin against the law or power of the Holy Ghost is worst of all. If the Pharisees sinned against the Holy Ghost, when they calumniated the gifts of the Spirit, which were gloriously display'd in the miracles Christ wrought for the confirmation of his doctrine; how great will be our guilt, if we calumniate both his gifts and graces! Hence it is that our Lord gives us to understand, that Whosoever shall speak a word against the Father, or against the Son, it shall be forgiven him. But unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost, for only lieth to the Holy Ghost, I it shall not be forgiven; but he shall be severely punished in this world, as Ananias and Sapphira were; or in the next, as the Pharisees who died in all the obstinacy of unbelief. The apostle undoubtedly considers the superiority of the Spirit's dispensation, and the aggravated nature of the sins, which are committed against the Holy Ghost, where he says It is (human speaking) impossible for those, who were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, &c. if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance. Heb.VI.4-6. The reason is obvious: As it is more dangerous to fall from the top of a ladder, than from the middle, or the foot of it; so it is more perilous to fall from the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, than from that of the Son, or that of the Father.

XVII. It will enable us to do justice, by giving every denomination of worshipers the portion of praise or dispraise, which they deserve. To instance in some particulars: We shall praise the Deists, the Socinians, the Unitarians and the Moralists, for defending the dispensation of the Father; and we shall blame them, for not paying a proper regard to the perfective dispensations of the Son and Holy Ghost.—We shall express our gratitude to the Moravians, and to the Ministers who preach the gospel of Christ crucified, for the noble stand which they make for the dispensation of the Son; but we shall give them to understand, that we should be still more obliged to them, if they did as much justice to the dispensations of the Father, and the Holy Ghost, as they do to that of the Son.—We shall value the rigid Trinitarians, and the Papists, for their adherence to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; But we shall reprove them for

putting among their articles of faith, rash clauses, which set the seal of everlasting damnation upon the countless myriads of men, to whom the doctrine of the Trinity has not been fully revealed; And we shall beg of them to contend for the gracious dispensations of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, as well as the divine distinctions in the Godhead, which we call Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: For it is much more important to be practically acquainted with the grace, which belongs to each dispensation, than to entertain orthodox opinions concerning each divine person.—We shall acknowledge ourselves, greatly indebted to the Hutchinsonians, for their defence of the Father's dispensation, or of those two manifestations of the Father's grace, which are generally called the law of Moses, and the Baptism of John. But at the same time, we shall bear our testimony against the confusion, which they bring into the gospel, when they so crush and contract the ladder of the dispensations, as to reduce all the steps to one, which is to serve for all mankind throughout all ages.—And with regard to the Quakers and other mystics, we shall present them our grateful acknowledgments for their efforts to vindicate the dispensation of the Spirit: But we shall intreat them to do it in such a manner as to allow the dispensations of the Father, and the Son, their proper place on the scale of gospel truth; lest they should bring the dispensation of the Spirit as low as that of the Father; and should, by this means, destroy or weaken it, under pretence of giving it a greater extent.

XVIII. It will make us think more candidly of our departing or departed friends than those usually do, who admit but the highest gospel dispensation. If they see a neighbour, or a relation, die without having proceeded farther in religion than Simeon had before he saw Christ, or Cornelius before God sent an angel to him; they are tempted to pronounce him damned: Or at least they are afraid of indulging the hope, that he is saved. But if we understand the doctrine of the dispensations, we may without folly, in such a case, comfort ourselves with the thought, that if the friend we mourn, did not die in the Lord according to the dispensation of the Holy Ghost; yet he died in the fear of God, under the drawings of the Father, and expecting mercy thro' Jesus Christ: We may hope, that if he did not depart as triumphantly as St. Paul, who saw the crown of righteousness laid up for him; he departed as humbly as Jacob, who said, Lord, I have waited for thy salvation.

XIX. This doctrine will keep us from the opposite extreme. I mean from an unsriptural forwardness to pronounce that people die like excellent Christians, and share the blessedness of those, who depart this life as ripe for glory as St. Stephen was, merely because they acknowledge their sinfulness, and express their reliance on the favour of the Father, thro' the blood of the Son. Oh how many professors die more like Jews, than like Christians! More like the disciples of John baptized with water, than like the disciples of Christ baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire! Let us not doubt of their salvation, if the root of the matter was really in them: but let us not think of them more highly than we ought to do. Let us frankly acknowledge, that they apparently died in the wilderness, which belongs to the inferior dispensations, and not in the kingdom of God, which was typified by the good land of Canaan.

XX. It will make us pass a more scriptural judgment upon the living, as well as upon the dead. I would not sacrifice truth to love; but reconcile charity and ortho-

doxy. May the God of love and truth enable me so to contend for the one, as never to injure the other! And whilst I attempt to heal a wound given to brotherly kindness, may he preserve me from shewing the least contempt of divine Majesty! If I can trust the feelings of my breast, I had rather die, than presumptuously break the first table of the law, under pretence of preventing the second from being broken. Pulling down the right wing of the temple of truth in order to repair the left, would not be charity but sacrilege. However I will venture to publish my thoughts, in hopes that, if I am mistaken, some judicious reader will kindly point out my mistake.

To be deficient in orthodoxy is bad: but is it better to be deficient in charity? And are we not wanting in charity, when we do not hope all things of all men, consistently with a candid interpretation of the gospel-word, which is the rule of our faith and practice? Was there not a time when almost all the Christian world was tainted with the errors of Arius, as near all Europe was as with the errors of the Church of Rome, four hundred years ago? Have we any more reason to suppose that all good men in Christendom went to hell 1200 years ago because they were tainted with Arianism; than to think that, for many centuries, all our pious forefathers were damn'd, because they were tainted with popery? God forbid I should countenance Arianism, much less Socinianism! But God forbid I should declare, that the life of all Arians and Socinians, is absolutely hopeless! May not some sincere worshippers of the Father fall into the errors of Arius thro' mistake rather than malice? May we not affirm, that, as the doctrines of grace are the first doctrines of the gospel, and the doctrines of justice, the second: the existence of one God, or the unity of God, is the first truth of religion as the trinity of persons is the second? And as we see daily good mistaken men, yea gospel-ministers, who in the sincerity of their hearts, turn antinomians in theory, and decry the doctrines of justice and holiness, out of a partial regard for the doctrines of grace; may not good mistaken men, in the sincerity of their hearts, turn Arians, or Socinians, and oppose the doctrine of the Trinity, out of a partial regard for the doctrine of God's Unity. Are not both those mistakes equally unscriptural? Have we any more right to doom such Arians to destruction than to threaten such Antinomians with the damnation of hell? And may not the former inconsistently trust in Christ for salvation, tho' they call him only the first begotten of Creation just as the latter inconsistently do good works, altho' they call them only dross, dung and filthy rags? Who can fathom human inconsistency? The more I consider it, the more I am constrained to cry out, O the depth! But what weighs most with me in this matter, is what follows.

According to the scriptural doctrine of the dispensations [...I requiring us to believe that God is, and not that he exists under the distinction of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Nay, if we believe the Scriptures, we must candidly allow, that it is possible to be under the dispensation of the Son, without having clearer views of his divinity than John the Baptist seems to have had,¹ when he sent two of his disciples to enquire, whether Jesus were the Christ, or whether we should look for another Saviour. It is true that after our Lord's resurrection, when the apostles were grown strong in the faith which belongs to the dispensation of the Son, they had clearer apprehensions of their Master's Deity: For Peter recognized his omniscience, and Thomas called him his God. But before that time, they did not seem to have had much higher thoughts of

his Person than Arius, or much clearer notions of his atonement than Mr. Law. Had they firmly believed that he was God, they would not have thought that they were going to the bottom of the sea, because his humanity was asleep and when he had laid the storm, they would not have said basely What manner of man is this, &c? As if they had just conceived the idea, that he could control the elements as well as Moses and Elijah. They would have been as much afraid to run away when a handful of servants headed by a traitor came to seize him, as soldiers would be afraid to desert for fear of an insignificant mob, if they knew that their captain is endued with omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. Nor would Peter have denied him, for fear of a deriding maid; any more than Abednego would have run into a burning fiery furnace, for fear of a buzzing insect. But the strongest proof, that the most sincere disciples of our Lord, had once very imperfect views of his divinity and atonement, is their supposition, that their hopes of redemption were cut off by his atoning death; and their amazing backwardness to believe his foretold resurrection upon the fullest testimony of the most credible witnesses. Had they really known him to be God, the Resurrection, and the Life, they would no more have wondered at his rising from the dead three days after his crucifixion, than we wonder at an excellent swimmer appearing on the surface of the waves, three seconds after he has plunged into the sea. Had they had a clear and firm belief of the doctrine of the atonement, and of the benefits secured to them by the shedding of Christ's blood; they would no more have fallen into unbelieving dejection, when that precious blood was shed for them, than a debtor be discouraged, when his creditor was satisfied; or a wretched slave driven to despair when his ransom was fully paid. These and the like observations draw the following inference. If our Lord's disciples were in the state of infant-grace and initial salvation, even when they had as imperfect views of his divine nature and sacrificial atonement as Mr. Lindsey and Mr. Law; we are not left absolutely destitute of all scriptural hopes, that the sincere worshippers of God, who believe that Jesus is the Christ, and are unhappily [not maliciously] tainted with the errors of Mr. Law, of Arius, and of Socinus, concerning the atonement and the divinity of Christ, may have some interest in the divine favour, thro' that very Mediator whom they deny in part, as Peter once had, when denying him altogether, he said, I know not the man. And tho' such worshippers can never have the abundant entrance into heaven, which those Christians have, who call Christ Lord and God by the Holy Ghost, and who experience the full virtue of his atoning blood; yet if they truly fear God, and sincerely work righteousness, the scripture does not leave us without some hopes, that they may be saved as righteous heathens under the dispensation of the Father, and perhaps as babes under the dispensation of the Son. §If this inference offends the rigid orthodox, I humbly beg they would consider the following queries.—Is there not a scriptural medium between the lax Principles of a loose latitudinarian, and the damnatory sentences of an uncharitable bigot? And should we not endeavour to find out such a medium?—Is it not the duty of gospel-ministers to preach the whole gospel, or [which comes to the same thing] to preach all the gospel-dispensations? And should they not be as ready to give milk to the babes, as to give strong meat to the strong, under every gospel-dispensation? Do we give milk to the babes under the dispensation of the Son,

when we tell them, that they shall be eternally damned if they do not at once receive a doctrine, which the apostles themselves had not properly received, when they had been for two or three years eye witnesses of our Lord's miracles, and ear-witnesses of the excellency of his doctrine?—Is not this method of enforcing truth upon the weak, more likely to surfeit than to nourish them?—If we ought not to be ashamed of the gospel of Christ, which reveals the righteousness of God from faith to faith; is it not as wrong in the rigid Athanasians, to be ashamed of the lowest degrees of faith, to which the Socinians and Arians have attained; as it is wrong in the rigid imperfectionists, to be ashamed of the highest degrees of faith, which fathers in Christ had reached when they said, with respect to perfect love, as he [Christ] was so are we in this world? Should we not tenderly nurse the babes, as our Lord did the apostles; pointing them as they can bear to the dispensation of the Spirit, who, when he is come, will testify of Christ's godhead, and lead them into all the truth?—If the Christian church were compared to a tree, and those who are weak in the faith of Christ to the buds of the tree, might we not ask, if it is not absurd and wicked to cut off the buds, because they are not yet expanded into blossoms, and fruits?—If we considered godly Arians, and the followers of Mr. Law, as babes in the dispensation of the Son, should we not have a better opportunity of helping their weak faith, than we have when we consider them as heretics, fit to be delivered to the magistrate for corporal punishment, and to the devil for everlasting burnings?—Is not such a conduct fitter to turn the heart of those semi-Christians against our principles, than to help them to higher degrees of the faith, which we contend for?—Are not severe, proud, inexorable bigots, who think that they could not enjoy heaven, if they did not see their brethren, who are weak and imperfect in the faith, burn in the flames of hell;—are not, I say, such uncharitable people condemned by the law of every gospel-dispensation, according to this declaration of our Lord, What ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them, for this is the law and the prophets?—And have we any more reason to sentence to damnation, those who are weak under the dispensation of the Son; than we have to say, to myriads of imperfect believers, who are weak in the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, Ye shall be damn'd, because your weak faith cannot yet digest the doctrine of Christian perfection, and see the need of receiving the Holy Ghost since ye believed in Christ? "Damning men," said once a great divine, "is a very hard thing; and therefore, whenever we do it, the case must be wonderfully plain." Nor will it suffice to say that Christ plainly told the obstinate Jews, Except you believe that I am he, you shall die in your sins, for no follower of Arius and of Mr. Law denies, that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God.

I shall close these queries by observing again, that I do not propose them to countenance the errors of Arius and Socinus, which I detest; but to cherish the buddings of faith, which appear in some of Arius' and sincere followers of God and perhaps exceeds hundreds of warm orthodox in works of righteousness, as well as in Christian benevolence. I glory in my Saviour's Divinity, as well as in his cross and atonement, and, the damnatory clauses of St. Athanasius's Creed excepted, I cordially receive it. But those clauses I could wish to be better guarded, because they seem to militate against the lower dispensations of divine grace, and to send to hell all the righteous

men, who are strong in the dispensation of the Father, and all the believers who are weak in the dispensation of the Son, merely because the former have not been blessed with a revelation of the Trinity, and because the latter cannot admit human and philosophical explanations of that deep mystery.

XXI. As an acquaintance with the doctrine of the dispensations will hinder the orthodox from giving place to a bitter zeal against feeble and imperfect believers in the Son: so it will prevent such believers from thinking, that Christians, who are strong in the dispensation of the son, and walk in the comforts of the Holy Ghost, are unreasonable and enthusiastical men. If it be wrong in advanced Christians, to despise the weak, and to provoke them to anger by passing upon them rash sentences of eternal damnation; is it not absurd in feeble Christians, who just lisp the language of Canaan, and can not yet properly call God Father, and Christ Lord, to condemn those who can, and to call them visionaries, credulous bigots, enthusiasts, and mad men? O ye, who are guilty of such reviling, study the doctrine of the new-birth. Confess that you are as yet stranger to the birth of the Spirit: nor dare any longer to ridicule the high knowledge, and to blaspheme the deep experiences of spiritual men; lest you be found opposers of one of the most precious truths of God, and despisers of one of his deepest mysteries; opposers of this precious truth; God was manifest in the flesh; and despisers of this profound mystery, The bodies of spiritual Christians are the temples of the Holy Ghost, and complete believers are an habitation of God the Spirit.

"Who among us [said a deep writer of the last century] is yet able to comprehend all the distinct ages and growths of good minds?—We are too proud to understand the condescensions, too low to take the height, too shallow to fathom the depth, of divine truth and goodness, and the various communications of them to us. We cannot assign the highest or the lowest state of saints, whilst they are here below. We ought not to say, All above this, is fancy and delusion—All below that, is carnal and superstitious. As we ought not then to despise that which is below; so let us not condemn that which is above us.—There is as great a difference in the statures of souls as of bodies.—And if we cannot yet embrace each other in our several growths, measures and attainments, it is because we have dark and contracted hearts, feel but little of the love of Christ, nor are yet filled with that Spirit, which is the spring, the center, and the circle to all good spirits in heaven and on earth."

To conclude these uses of our doctrine: Only restore the doctrine of the dispensations of divine grace to its evangelical order and dignity; and you will take from Christians the most plausible pretenses of their uncharitable divisions. The strong will no more despise the weak, nor the weak deride the strong. All shall speak the truth in love according to the proportion of their faith, and according to the measure of the rule, which God hath distributed, and they have attained. All sorts of persecutions will be at an end. Rash judgments will be banish'd from the Christian world. And star-chambers, courts of inquisition, and fiery piles consume heretics, will have no place left but in the deplorable annals of fallen Christendom. The conduct of the orthodox, who bum the bodies of their weak brethren, or say to them, You Arian and Socinian heretics, Your souls shall bum in hell to all eternity, because you do not believe as much concerning the Son and Holy Ghost as we do;—this conduct, I say, will appear

as contrary to Christianity and humanity, as the behaviour of elder brothers would do, if they fancied that they cannot be zealous for the honour of their family, unless they abuse and beat the younger brothers, because they cannot wear such large shoes, or each such strong meat, as they do themselves. And, on the other hand, the conduct of those who continue babes in the dispensation of the Son, and who ridicule the believers who are fathers in that dispensation, or little children in the dispensation of the Holy Ghost; calling them idolaters, and enthusiasts;—the conduct of such babes in Christian experience, will appear as absurd as the behavior of a younger brother in a state of childhood; if he abused his older brothers who advance towards man's estate, because the clothes which they wear are a great deal too big for them; and if he called them drunkards and madmen, because they can bear to drink wines, which are as yet too rich for their stomachs, and too strong for their weak constitution.

Lastly: It will prevent numberless mistakes, cavils, and contentions, about the time of our being enlightened, regenerated, and converted. I shall produce one instance of many. When Mr. Wesley wrote his first journal, he leaned too much towards the system of doctrine, which makes nothing of the dispensation of the Father, and confounds the dispensation of the Son with that of the Holy Ghost. Being then convinced, that he was a stranger to the peculiar dispensation of the Holy Ghost, and to the luminous faith of that dispensation; and supposing there was no true faith in Christ short of that peculiarly quickning faith, which the disciples of John, or feeble believers in Christ receive, when they are endued with power from on high; he spoke of himself as unenlightened, unregenerate, unconverted, and dead. Some of his words were, 'O why is it, that God will use such an instrument as me! Lord let the dead bury their dead! But wilt thou send the dead to raise the dead?—I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.'—It is evident from the context, that Mr. Wesley spake here of Pentecostal conversion—of that spiritual change, concerning which our Lord said to Peter: When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren: which Peter so abundantly did on the very day, in which he was baptized with the Holy Ghost, and born of the Spirit, or, which is the same thing, converted according to mighty power of that high dispensation. It is of this full conversion, that our Lord spake, when he said to all the other apostles, as well as to Peter, Except you be converted, and become as little children [totally thoughtless with respect to pre-eminence and superiority] you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Matt. XVIII.2.

2. Nevertheless the Apostles and Peter were then truly converted, according to the dispensations of the Father and the Son: And so was Mr. Wesley, when he went to America to preach the gospel to the Indians. However Mr. Row. Hill, in what he calls his Full answer to Mr. Wesley, availing himself of the veil of confusion, which hides the doctrines of the dispensations and of the new-birth, pretends that Mr. Wesley deals in gross untruths, when he insinuates, that it pleased God to begin by him the revival of inward religion known by the name of Methodism. Mr. Hill's words, which he supports by the above-quoted extracts of Mr. Wesley's journal, are these: 'Mr. Wesley was then also according to his own account not enlightened,'—so that if he did begin the present revival of religion, which is absolutely false, be it known unto all men, that he began it blindfold.—No: no more than John the Baptist began blindfold

the revival, known by the name of Christianity. Such erroneous and rash judgments, which some professors pass upon themselves, and which others pass upon their brethren, would be entirely prevented; if the doctrine of the dispensations, had in the Church as much place as the Scriptures.

§ I leave candid readers to decide, if from these uses of this doctrine, it does not appear, that it is the principal doctrine of the gospel, and that it may be justly compared to a golden ring, by which we can draw all the silver links, which compose the chain of gospel-truth.

NOTE

I. Many eminent divines suppose, that John sent this embassy to Christ for the satisfaction of those two disciples, and not for his own satisfaction. But I beg leave to dissent from them for the following reasons. (1) Their opinion is contrary to the sad circumstances, in which John found himself: He expected a great reformer and a mighty deliverer, who should immediately complete the overthrow of vice: but instead of seeing himself supported by Christ, he beheld vice triumphant, and found himself in prison, ready to be sacrificed to the petulance of a dancing girl, and the revenge of an incestuous woman. And therefore, tho' he had been divinely inform'd, that Jesus was the Lamb of God, it was natural enough for him to admit a doubt about it, in his truly deplorable situation, and to want some new cordial to revive his drooping faith. Hence the secret embassy, which he sent to Christ.—(2) If John had sent his disciples that they might be satisfied concerning that our Lord was the Redeemer of Israel, would he have sent but two? Were there but two who wanted clearer light on that head? And do not circumstances indicate, that he sent two of his most trusty disciples upon this private errand, that his message might have sufficient weight? And he sent but two, lest he should disclose too much his doubtful anxiety.—(3) Had John sent this extraordinary Message, merely for the satisfaction of others, he would have acted a part unbecoming his noble simplicity, and his rough sincerity, by sending it as if he wanted to be satisfied himself: Nor would our Lord have entered into the supposed cunning of John, by saying, Go and shew John again those things, which ye see and hear: but he would have replied, John is perfectly satisfied, that I am he, who was to come to destroy the works of the devil: It is you only who doubt of it, and your wavering faith may be fully confirmed by what you see and hear. (4) Is it strange that John the Baptist should have doubted in prison, when the Apostles, who had heard again and again the heavenly voice,—which declared that our Lord was the Son of God, doubted even after his resurrection, and after all the wonders which had accompanied his death? So true it is, that the least in the dispensation of the perfected gospel, is greater than John in the knowledge of Christ, in assurance and in comforts! Tho' John is greater in dignity than all the Prophets, because he had the honour of baptizing the Messiah, of closing the train of the old testament Saints, and leading the van of the evangelical prophets.