

A

MEMOIR

OF THE

REV. JOHN H. RICE, D.D.

First Professor of Christian Theology in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia.

BY WILLIAM MAXWELL.



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TO THE REV. ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER, D. D.

*Prince Edward, April 6th, 1825.*

MY DEAR SIR,

I returned home last evening from an excursion to Powhatan, and find Mr. G—— just about to take his departure. He is urgent to go, but I must detain him while I drop you a few lines. Mr. G. has pleased us all very much. He would be very popular here; and if he were a single man, I should wish him very much to come to the South.

I went to Powhatan to give some assistance to Mr. P——. He is labouring there with encouraging prospects of success. I do hope that he will build up a church in that blighted and desolate region. He is very active and zealous, and is at once anxious to improve himself, and do good to the people. He has gained love and respect more rapidly, and to greater extent, than I expected. Indeed he will do no discredit to Princeton, or Presbyterianism.”

About this time, Dr. Rice found himself called upon to notice another sermon which the Bishop of North Carolina had lately preached before the Bible Society of that state, and afterwards published, and in which he made what was generally considered as an open and flagrant attack upon the American Bible Society, and all its auxiliaries throughout the country; and with good reason; for, in his discourse, he undertook to show that the act of circulating the word of God, in their manner, without note or comment, was a most pernicious proceeding, inasmuch as it manifestly implied as a fundamental principle, “that the scriptures are exclusively sufficient for their own interpretation.” But this principle, he contended, was “unfounded and dangerous, and ultimately subversive of all revealed religion.” 1st. Because it falsely supposed that the structure of scripture was such as not to require the aid of a skilful interpreter to explain and expound it; 2. Because it implied that

man was not a fallen creature, and therefore so averse to the truth as to be incapable of finding it out by a mere reading of the word of God; and 3. Because it implied that the influence of the Holy Spirit, which was plainly indispensable to a right understanding of the scriptures, necessarily accompanied the reading of them; all which, was contrary to fact, and to the Bible itself. It was, therefore, grossly improper to unite with these societies, in circulating the scriptures *by themselves*, as it involved, in fact, the radical error of separating the word of God from his ministry: whereas, the only proper mode of doing the thing, was to send them along with *the church*, or the *preachers* of it; to wit, the "bishops and other clergy" of the one only "Catholic and Apostolic" church; that is, the Episcopal church, of course.

Now it was easy to see, at a glance, that all this was a mere tissue of misconception and mistake from beginning to end. For, in the first place, it was perfectly plain that the act of distributing the word of God without note or comment, did *not* imply, as the Bishop so strangely assumed, that "the scriptures were exclusively sufficient for their own interpretation," but only implied in fact, that they might do much good by the virtue of their own text, (and the grace of God along with it,) without the gloss of any interpreter whatever; and *this* truth he admitted himself. And how could it be said to separate the word of God from his church or its ministry, when it was actually furnishing the people with the very book which those "authorized agents" (whoever they were,) who were duly commissioned and qualified for the purpose, were to expound and explain? Or could it make any odds *how*, or *by whom*, the text-books of the teachers were put into the hands of the scholars? Indeed the hallucination of the whole argument was so glaring on its face, that the sermon might have been left "without note or comment," to the judgment of those who might choose to read it, even among his own denomination, the great body

of whom were much more likely to go right with the Bishop of Virginia, (who was the President of the Bible Society of the state,) than to go wrong with the Bishop of North Carolina. The latter, however, had no small *authority* with many in his own diocess, and with some out of it; and Doctor Rice was too cordially attached to the great christian cause of Bible Societies, and to the protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of the scriptures, (which the Bishop had incidentally questioned,) to see them openly assailed, and by such an enemy, without defending them against his attacks. Accordingly, he came out with a review of this offensive sermon, in the April and June numbers of the magazine, in which he ably and thoroughly exposed the errors of the Bishop's discourse, and in a style and spirit that gave entire satisfaction, this time, to *all* his readers.\*

TO MR. KNOWLES TAYLOR.

*Theological Seminary, June 25th, 1825.*

MY DEAR CHRISTIAN BROTHER,

Our last mail brought me your very acceptable letter, for which I beg you to accept my sincere thanks. To our heavenly Father, I desire to render gratitude and praise for his mercies both to you and to me, in sparing our lives, and

\* This controversy is gone by, and the question involved in it is not likely, I suppose, to be raised again, or I should have given some account of the argument on both sides. I must say, however, that it was really rather amusing to see how kindly the good bishop saved his antagonists the trouble of answering him, by very fairly answering himself as he went along. Thus after asserting that the act of distributing the Bible without note or comment, as our Bible societies are doing, is dangerous and pernicious, he inadvertently allows that there are *some things* in the Book which any man may read with advantage by himself. Thus he says, "*the preceptive parts of revelation are plain and perspicuous, so as to be immediately apprehended; those which are doctrinal partake of different degrees of clearness according to the nature of the doctrine inculcated; and those which are mysterious, are clothed with an obscurity which even the angels desire to look into. Yet*