

DEFENDING THE FAITH

“Christianity has stood erect in the midst of all sorts of adversaries--Jews, Pagans, Turks, infidels, etc.; and, like the pillars of Hercules, the rock of Gibraltar, or the everlasting mountains, bids defiance to all the billows of the ocean, and to all the tempests of Satan, to shake it from its immovable basis.”

Whenever society, religious or political, falls into error; or rather, so long as it is imperfect, it is the duty of all who have any talent or ability to oppose error, moral or political, who have intelligence to distinguish, and utterance to express, truth and goodness, to lift up a standard against it, and to panoply themselves for the combat.

MANY good men whose whole lives have been one continued struggle with themselves, one continued warfare against error and iniquity, have reprobated religious controversy as a great and manifold evil to the combatants and to society. Although engaged in a real controversy, they knew it not; but supposed that they only were controversialists who were in debates and discussions often. Had they reflected but a moment, they would have discovered that no man can be a good man who does not oppose error and immorality in himself, his family, his neighborhood, and in society as far as he can reach, and that he cannot oppose it successfully only by argument, or, as some would say, by word and deed--by precept and by example.

There can be no improvement without controversy. Improvement requires and presupposes change; change is innovation, and innovation always has elicited opposition, and that is what constitutes the essentials of controversy. Every man who reforms his own life has a controversy with himself. And, therefore, no man who has not always been perfect, and always been in company with perfect society, can be a good man without controversy. This being conceded, (and who can refuse to concede it?) it follows that whenever society, religious or political, falls into error; or rather, so long as it is imperfect, it is the duty of all who have any talent or ability to oppose error, moral or political, who have intelligence to distinguish, and utterance to express, truth and goodness, to lift up a standard against it, and to panoply themselves for the combat.

But yet, plain and obvious as the preceding remarks maybe, many will contend that religious controversy, oral or written, is incompatible with the pacific and contemplative character of the genuine christian, and promotive of strifes, tumults, and factions in society, destructive of true piety towards God and of benevolence towards man. This is a prejudice arising from the abuses of controversy. Admit for a moment that it were so, and what would be the consequence? It would unsaint and unchristianize every distinguished Patriarch, Jew, and Christian enrolled in

the sacred annals of the word. For who of the Bible's great and good men was not engaged in religious controversy! To go no farther back than the Jewish lawgiver, I ask, What was his character? I need not specify. Whenever it was necessary, all--yes, all the renowned men of antiquity were religious controversialists. Moses long contended with the Egyptian magi. He overcame Jannes and Jambres too. Elijah encountered the prophets of Baal. Job long debated with the princes of Edom. The Jewish prophets and the idolatrous kings of Israel waged a long and arduous controversy. John the Harbinger, and the Scribes and Pharisees, met in conflict. Jesus, and the Rabbis, and the Priesthood, long debated. The Apostles and the Sanhedrim; the Evangelists and the Doctors of Divinity; Paul and the Sceptics, engaged in many a conflict; and even Michael fought in "wordy debate" with the Devil about the body of Moses; yet who was more meek than Moses--more zealous for God than Elijah--more patient than Job--more devout than Paul--more benevolent than John?

If there was no error in principle or practice, then controversy, which is only another name for opposition to error, real or supposed, would be unnecessary. If it were lawful, or if it were benevolent, to make a truce with error, then opposition to it would be both unjust and unkind. If error were innocent and harmless, then we might permit it to find its own quietus, or to immortalize itself. But so long as it is confessed that error is more or less injurious to the welfare of society, individually and collectively considered, then no man can be considered benevolent who does not set his face against it. In proportion as a person is intelligent and benevolent, he will be controversial, if error exist around him. Hence the Prince of Peace never sheathed the sword of the Spirit while he lived. He drew it on the banks of the Jordan and threw the scabbard away.

We have only to ask how we inherited so many blessings, religious and political, contrasted with our ancestors some five hundred years ago, to ascertain of what use controversy has been, and how much we are indebted to it. All was silent and peaceful as the grave under the gloomy scepter of Roman Pontiffs under the despotic sway of the Roman hierarchy until Luther opened the war. The Roman priesthood denounced the "ruinous errors" and "damnable heresies" of Luther, the "*deadly influence*" of the tongue and pen of the hierarch; but they fasted, and prayed, and denounced in vain. No crocodile tears "over the souls of men;" no religious penances for "the church in danger;" no invocation of "all who loved Zion;" no holy co-operation of "the friends of evangelical principles," could check the career of this reforming Hercules. Bulls of excommunication assailed him as stubble would Leviathan in the deep. "He feared no discipline of human hands." All was impotent and unavailing. The fire then kindled, though oft suppressed, yet burns.

The controversy begun by Luther, not only maimed the power of the Roman hierarchy, but also impaired the arm of political despotism. The *crown*, as well as the *mitre*, was jeopardized and desecrated by his herculean pen. From the controversy about the *rights of christians* arose the controversy about the *rights of men*. Every blow inflicted upon ecclesiastical despotism was felt by the political tyrants.

Religious controversy has enlightened the world. It gave new vigor to the mind; and the era of the Reformation was the era of the Revival of Literature. It has enlightened men upon all subjects--in all the arts and sciences--in all things--philosophic, literary, moral, political. It was

the tongue and pen of controversy which developed the true solar system--laid the foundation for the American Revolution--abolished the slave trade--and which has so far disenthralled the human mind from the shackles of superstition. Locke and Sidney, Milton and Newton, were all controvertists and reformers, philosophers, literary, religious and political. Truth and liberty, both religious and political, are the first fruits of well directed controversy. Peace and eternal bliss will be the "harvest home." Let the opponents of controversy, or they who *controvert controversy*, remember, that had there been no controversy, neither the Jewish nor the Christian religion could have ever been established; nor had it ceased could the Reformation have ever been achieved. It has been the parent of almost all the social blessings which we enjoy.

If, indeed, all mankind were equally in love with truth, equally rational, equally intelligent, and equally disinterested, we might have only to propose a change for the better, and all would embrace it. But just the reverse of this is the true history of society. He is but little experienced in the human heart--he knows but little of the world, who imagines that what appears clear, wise, and useful to *him*, appears so to *all*; or that it is only necessary to support truth and goodness by unanswerable arguments, to render them universally triumphant. The more clearly and forcibly an unpopular truth is argued, the greater will be the dislike to it by all who are interested in representing it to be an error. Melancthon was for a time the subject of an illusion of this sort. He once told Luther that so clear were his apprehensions, so deep his convictions, and so forcible his arguments, that he could soon convince all Germany of the truth of the Reformation principles. He became an itinerant, and commenced a campaign against the priesthood. On returning from his first tour Luther said to him, "Well, Melancthon, what speed?" "Alas!" replied the young reformer, "old Adam is too strong for young Melancthon."

A little experience will convince the most astute that the clearness and force of argument will not subdue opposition. It very frequently provokes the greater resentment. The adversaries of the Messiah are proof of this. So were the aristocrats in the late Virginia Convention. Orpheus could, by his music, as easily have caused the oaks to follow him, as could the republicans, by their arguments and demonstrations, have caused the oligarchs in power to consent to extend equal rights and immunities to the proscribed casts in this commonwealth.

When error has but a single ally in the corruptions of the human heart, it is, very formidable; but how strong when pride, passion, and interest become its auxiliaries! To overcome these, reason and logic must be strong indeed, and rhetoric most persuasive. Pride, ambition, and selfishness, are all powerful allies of error. Hence double, triple, and quadruple the evidence necessary to *convert* a layman, will not often *convince* a priest. The pride of the understanding is the most invincible of all sorts of pride, and more especially when religion is the problem. A bigoted skeptic, a prejudiced sectary, and an interested priest, are more without the pale of reason, are more beyond the reach of controversy, than the errorists of any other school. But while error lives, and falsehood has all auxiliary upon earth, controversy will be necessary, and argument indispensable.

When controversy proceeds from benevolence it will be more successful and less injurious to the comfort of them who are engaged in it. But when argument and debate are dictated by resentment, prompted by pride, or controlled by the lust of power, the hearts of the combatants must be polluted, and their passions inflamed. The wrath of man never did, and it never can,

effect the righteousness which God requires; nor can it promote the happiness of man. When we love truth for its own sake, and when our efforts to maintain it proceed from brotherly kindness and love to all men, then we will plead its cause with force and with success; and then, and then only, will we be sanctified and blessed in the work. But a controversy for opinion, or for truth, instituted by vanity, by the pride of understanding, or the lust of power, will pollute the heart, aggravate the passions, sour the temper, and terminate in vain jangling. But because it has been *abused* shall we desist from the *use* of it? This would be to make a covenant with death, and an agreement with destruction. This would be to live in vain, and to die without honor. This would be to depart from the example of the Confessors, Martyrs, and Apostles of Jesus, and to renounce our allegiance to the King eternal, immortal, and invisible. For so long as error in principle and in practice exists, so long will it be the duty and the felicity of the intelligent and the good to oppose it: and as long as there are conflicting creeds, sects, and divisions among religionists, so long will it be our duty to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.

But never was there so much need to study the "*suaviter in modo*," and the "*fortiter in re*," amiability in the manner, and firmness in the purpose, as in the defence of truth. We must conciliate the passions, while we besiege the understanding. We are not to suppose all our opponents to be knaves and impostors, to be interested and obstinate. We must remember that in this world of weakness and of error the good and the virtuous are often found enlisted under the banners of error. There are honest differences of opinion, and men equally sincere and virtuous on both sides of every question. This must never be lost sight of. It is nevertheless true that our great models, the Prophets and Apostles; nay, the Saviour himself, though often mild as the genial influence of Spring, were sometimes severe and surly as the Winter's blast. At one time, and amidst one class of opponents, they were as gentle as the balmy zephyrs on beds of violets; at another time, and amidst other opponents, they were like the mountain storm roaring through the cliffs. Soft and persuasive were their words and arguments to those who appeared honest in their convictions, but severe and tart were their reproofs to such as appeared obstinate in error. Hence Paul, who instructed his son Timothy to imitate him in all things, admonished him to instruct some opponents "with all meekness," and "sharply to rebuke and confute" others. So did Peter and Jude in their epistles. "Make a difference," says Jude, between those "who are complainers, who walk according to their own lusts, whose mouths speak great swelling words, and admire men's persons for the sake of gain"--"have compassion upon other errorists;" "save them with fear, hating the garments spotted by the pollutions of the flesh." No man ever spoke more severely of certain teachers than Peter in his second epistle. We must, in all our controversies, make the same differences. When we find persons like Balaam, obstinately intent on covetous courses, for the sake of others we must not spare them. But courtesy and benevolence will be our best guides; and a good example will often achieve more than a thousand arguments.

To your posts, then, O Israel! Remember you have enlisted not for *six months*, like some of our sectarian militia; but you have vowed allegiance during the war. "Fight the good fight of faith." Keep your eyes upon the Captain; and when the conflict is over he will cover you with laurels which will never wither, and bestow upon you a crown of righteousness which fadeth not away.

Millennial Harbinger (1830)

