The Works of John Owen

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The Works of
JOHN OWEN
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The Banner of Truth Trust
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sent discourse is singly designed, I affirm. That it is the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to believe the Scripture to be the word of God, or the supernatural, immediate revelation of his mind unto us, and infallibly to evidence it unto our minds, so as that we may spiritually and savingly acquiesce therein. Some, upon a mistake of this proposition, do seem to suppose that we resolve all faith into private suggestions of the Spirit or deluding pretences thereof; and some (it may be) will be ready to apprehend that we confound the efficient cause and formal reason of faith or believing, rendering all rational arguments and external testimonies useless. But, indeed, there neither is nor shall be any occasion administered unto these fears or imaginations; for we shall plead nothing in this matter but what is consonant to the faith and judgment of the ancient and present church of God, as shall be fully evidenced in our progress. I know some have found out other ways whereby the minds of men, as they suppose, may be sufficiently satisfied in the divine authority of the Scripture; but I have tasted of their new wine and desire it not, because I know the old to be better, though what they plead is of use in its proper place.

CHAPTER II.

What it is infallibly to believe the Scripture to be the word of God, affirmed.

My design requires that I should confine my discourse unto as narrow bounds as possible, and I shall so do, showing,—

I. What it is in general infallibly to believe the Scripture to be the word of God, and what is the ground and reason of our so doing; or, what it is to believe the Scripture to be the word of God, as we are required to believe it so to be in a way of duty:

II. That there are external arguments of the divine original of the Scripture, which are effectual motives to persuade us to give an unfeigned assent thereunto:

III. That yet, moreover, God requires of us that we believe them to be his word with faith divine, supernatural, and infallible:

IV. Evidence the grounds and reasons whereon we do so believe, and ought so to do.

Unto these heads most of what ensues in the first part of this discourse may be reduced.

It is meet that we should clear the foundation whereon we build, and the principles whereon we do proceed, that what we design to prove may be the better understood by all sorts of persons, whose edification we intend; for these things are the equal concernment of
the learned and unlearned. Wherefore, some things must be insisted on which are generally known and granted; and our first inquiry is, What it is to believe the Scripture to be the word of God with faith divine and supernatural, according as it is our duty so to do.

1. And in our believing, or our faith, two things are to be considered:—(1) What it is that we do believe; and, (2) Wherefore we do so believe it. The first is the material object of our faith,—namely, the things which we do believe; the latter, the formal object of it, or the cause and reason why we do believe them. And these things are distinct. The material object of our faith is the things revealed in the Scripture, declared unto us in propositions of truth; for things must be so proposed unto us, or we cannot believe them. That God is one in three persons, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the like propositions of truth, are the material object of our faith, or the things that we do believe; and the reason why we do believe them is, because they are proposed in the Scripture. Thus the apostle expresseth the whole of what we intend: 1 Cor. xv. 1, 2, "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, are the things proposed unto us to be believed, and so the object of our faith; but the reason why we believe them is, because they are declared in the Scriptures; see Acts viii. 26–38. Sometimes, indeed, this expression of "believing the Scriptures," by a metonymy, denotes both the formal and material objects of our faith, the Scriptures themselves as such, and the things contained in them: so John ii. 22, "They believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus said," or the things delivered in the Scripture and farther declared by Christ, which before they understood not. And they did so believe what was declared in the Scriptures because it was so declared in them. Both are intended in the same expression, "They believed the Scripture," under various considerations. So Acts xxvi. 27. The material object of our faith, therefore, are the articles of our creed, by whose enumeration we answer unto that question, "What do we believe?" giving an account of the hope that is in us, as the apostle doth, Acts xxvi. 22, 23. But if, moreover, we are asked a reason of our faith or hope, or why we believe the things we profess, as God to be one in three persons, Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, we do not answer, "Because so it is, for this is that which we believe," which were senseless; but we must give some other answer unto that inquiry, whether it be made by others or ourselves. The proper answer unto this question contains the formal reason and object of our faith, that which it rests upon and is resolved into; and this is that which we look after.

2. We do not, in this inquiry, intend any kind of persuasion or faith but that which is divine and infallible; both which it is from its formal reason or objective cause. Men may be able to give some kind of reasons why they believe what they profess so to do, that will not suffice or abide the trial in this case, although they themselves may rest in them. Some, it may be, can give no other account hereof but that they have been so instructed by them whom they have sufficient reason to give credit unto, or that they have so received them by tradition from their fathers. Now, whatever persuasion those reasons may beget in the minds of men that the things which they profess to believe are true, yet if they are alone, it is not divine faith whereby they do believe, but that which is merely human, as being resolved into human testimony only, or an opinion on probable arguments; for no faith can be of any other kind than is the evidence it reflects on or ariseth from. I say it is so where they are alone; for I doubt not but that some who have never farther considered the reason of their believing than the teaching of their instructors have yet that evidence in their own souls of the truth and authority of God in what they believe that with respect thereunto their faith is divine and supernatural. The faith of most hath a beginning and progress not unlike that of the Samaritans, John iv. 40–42, as shall be afterwards declared.

3. When we inquire after faith that is infallible, or believing infallibly,—which, as we shall show hereafter, is necessary in this case,—we do not intend an inherent quality in the subject, as though he that believes with faith infallible must himself also be infallible; much less do we speak of infallibility absolutely, which is a property of God, who alone, from the perfection of his nature, can neither deceive nor be deceived: but it is that property or adjunct of the assent of our minds unto divine truths or supernatural revelations, whereby it is differentiated from all other kinds of assent whatever. And this it hath from its formal object, or the evidence whereon we give this assent; for the nature of every assent is given unto it by the nature of the evidence which it proceedeth from or releth on. This in divine faith is divine revelation; which, being infallible, renders the faith that rests on it and is resolved into it infallible also. No man can believe that which is false, or which may be false, with divine faith; for that which renders it divine is the divine truth and infallibility of the ground and evidence which it is built upon: but a man may believe that which is true infallibly so, and yet his faith not be infallible. That the Scripture is the word of God is infallibly true, yet the faith whereby a man believes it so to be may be fallible; for it is such as his evidence is, and no other. He may believe it to be so on tradition, or the testimony of the church of Rome only, or
on outward arguments; all which being fallible, his faith is so also, although the things he assents unto be infallibly true. Wherefore, unto this faith divine and infallible it is not required that the person in whom it is be infallible, nor is it enough that the thing itself believed he infallibly true; but, moreover, that the evidence whereon he doth believe it be infallible also. So it was with them who received divine revelations immediately from God. It was not enough that the things revealed unto them were infallibly true, but they were to have infallible evidence of the revelation itself; then was their faith infallible, though their persons were fallible. With this faith, then, a man can believe nothing but what is divinely true, and therefore it is infallible; and the reason is, because God's veracity, who is the God of truth, is the only object of it (hence saith the prophet, Deut. xxxii. 4, who "cannot lie," Tit. i. 2, and whose "word is truth," John xvii. 17, and the Spirit which gave it out is "truth," 1 John v. 6, hath revealed these things to be so. And our believing these things on that ground renders our faith divine and supernatural; supposing also a respect unto the subjective efficiency of the Holy Ghost inspiring it into our minds, whereas afterwards, or, to speak distinctly, our faith is supernatural, with respect unto the production of it in our minds by the Holy Ghost; and infallible, with respect unto the formal reason of it, which is divine revelation; and is divine, in opposition unto what is merely human, on both accounts.

As things are proposed unto us to be believed as true, faith in its assent respects only the truth or veracity of God; but whereas this faith is required of us in a way of obedience, and is considered not only physically, in its nature, but morally also, as our duty, it respects also the authority of God, which I therefore join with the truth of God as the formal reason of our faith: see 2 Sam. vii. 28. And these things the Scripture pleads and argues when faith is required of us in the way of obedience. "Thus saith the Lord," is that which is proposed unto us as the reason why we should believe what is spoken, whereas oftentimes other divine names and titles are added, signifying his authority who requires us to believe: "Thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel," Isa. xxx. 15; "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy," chap. vii. 15; "Believe in the Lord your God," 2 Chron. xxvii. 20. The word of the Lord" precedeth most revelations in the prophets, and other reason why we should believe the Scripture proposeth none, Heb. i. i, 2; yes, the interposition of any other authority between the things to be believed and our souls and consciences, besides the authority of God, overthrows the nature of divine faith;—I do not say the interposition of any other means whereby we should believe, of which sort God hath appointed many, but the interposition of any other authority upon which we should believe, as that pretended in and by the church of Rome. No man can be lords of our faith, though they may be "helpers of our joy."

5. The authority and truth of God, considered in themselves absolutely, are not the immediate formal object of our faith, though they are the ultimate whereunto it is resolved; for we can believe nothing on their account unless it be evidenced unto us, and this evidence of them is in that revelation which God is pleased to make of himself, for that is the only means whereby our consciences and minds are affected with his truth and authority. We do, therefore, no otherwise rest on the truth and veracity of God in any thing than we rest on the revelation which he makes unto us, for that is the only way whereby we are affected with them; not "The Lord is true" absolutely, but, "Thus saith the Lord," and, "The Lord hath spoken," is that which we have immediate regard unto. Hereby alone are our minds affected with the authority and veracity of God; and by what way soever it is made unto us, it is sufficient and able so to affect us. At first, as hath been showed, it was given immediately to some persons, and preserved for the use of others in an oral ministry; but now all revelation, as hath also been declared, is contained in the Scriptures only.

6. It follows that our faith, whereby we believe any divine, supernatural truth, is resolved into the Scripture, as the only means of divine revelation, affecting our minds and consciences with the authority and truth of God; or, the Scripture, as the only immediate, divine, infallible revelation of the mind and will of God, is the first immediate formal object of our faith, the sole reason why and ground whereon we do believe the things that are revealed with faith divine, supernatural, and infallible. We do believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God. Why do we so do? on what ground or reason? It is because of the authority of God commanding us so to do, and the
truth of God testifying thereunto. But how or by what means are our minds and consciences affected with the authority and truth of God, so as to believe with respect unto them, which makes our faith divine and supernatural? It is alone the divine, supernatural, infallible revelation that he hath made of this sacred truth, and of his will that we should believe it. But what is this revelation, or where is it to be found? It is the Scripture alone, which contains the entire revelation that God hath made of himself, in all things which he will have us to believe or do. Hence——

7. The last inquiry ariseth, How, or on what grounds, for what reasons, do we believe the Scripture to be a divine revelation, proceeding immediately from God, or to be that word of God which is truth divine and infallible? Whereunto we answer, It is solely on the evidence that the Spirit of God, in and by the Scripture itself, gives unto us that it was given by immediate inspiration from God; or, the ground and reason wherein we believe the Scripture to be the word of God are the authority and truth of God evidencing themselves in and by it unto the minds and consciences of men. Hence, as, whatever we assent unto as proposed in the Scripture, our faith rests on and is resolved into the veracity and faithfulness of God, so is it also in the believing the Scripture itself to be the infallible word of God, seeing we do it on no other grounds but its own evidence that so it is. This is that which is principally to be proved, and therefore to prepare for it and to remove prejudices, something is to be spoken to prepare the way thereunto.

CHAPTER III.

Sundry convincing external arguments for divine revelation.

There are sundry cogent arguments, which are taken from external considerations of the Scripture, that evince it on rational grounds to be from God. All these are motives of credibility, or effectual persuasives to account and esteem it to be the word of God. And although they neither are, nor is it possible they ever should be, the ground and reason wherein we believe it so to be with faith divine and supernatural, yet are they necessary unto the confirmation of our faith herein against temptations, oppositions, and objections. These arguments have been pleaded by many, and that usefully, and therefore it is not needful for me to insist upon them; and they are the same, for the substance of them, in ancient and modern writers, however managed by some with more learning, dexterity, and force of reasoning than by others. It may not be expected,