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THE BIBLE ITS OWN WITNESS | by Robert Lewis Dabney<sup>1</sup>

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*And many more believed, because of his own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world. John iv. 41, 42*

To him who reflects, the claim with which the gospel presents itself must appear exceedingly remarkable. Wherever it comes it demands immediate belief, as the first duty, and on pain of damnation, while it does not pause an instant to consider the knowledge of him whom it addresses concerning the literary evidences of its authenticity or his opportunity for informing himself. To the unlettered laborer, as to the laborious antiquary, she says alike, “Believe, and thou shalt be saved,” and “He that believeth not shall be damned.” On the other hand, the gospel demands an intelligent and rational faith; it contemns and sternly rejects the pretended assent of ignorance, prejudice, and subserviency, requiring us to be “able to give a reason for the hope that is in us.”<sup>2</sup> What is the explanation of this high and exacting attitude? What is that common ground of rational evidence, accessible to every reader and hearer, upon which this claim can justly rest?

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon, clearly a favorite of its author, was first preached in March of 1867 at Hampden Sydney College, Farmville, VA. Dabney preached the sermon again in November of that year at Salem Presbyterian Church, Salem, VA (Roanoke); at the Episcopal Church (probably St. Thomas), Orange County, VA; and at the meeting of the Synod of Virginia held in Charlestown, WV. He preached the sermon again in 1868, in May at The University of Virginia and at the Franklin Street Church, Baltimore, MD; in 1869, in August at Hebron Church, Staunton, VA; in 1870, in May, at First Presbyterian Church, Sweetwater, TN; and in 1871, in May, at First Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN and in June, at First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN. The sermon was published at the request of the first hearers as *The Bible Its Own Witness. A Sermon Delivered . . . in the Presbyterian Church at Farmville, VA*. Published by Request (Richmond, VA: Shepperson & Graves, 1871); reprint (Charlottesville, VA: Jeffersonian Republican Water Motor Presses, 1887). The sermon was reprinted in *The Southern Pulpit: A Collection of Sermons by Ministers of the Southern Presbyterian Church*. Richmond: PCP, 1896. It was one of the few sermons included in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.*, edited by C. R. Vaughan, D.D., 4 volumes (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890-93); reprint (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), I:115-131. The sermon was also published in *Discourses on the Creation, and The Bible Its Own Witness*, by Rev. Stuart Robinson, D.D., and Rev. R.L. Dabney, D.D. (Memphis: Shotwell & Co., n.d.). The footnotes, subheadings 2 and 3, and recommended readings in this edition were added by the editor of this reprint.

<sup>2</sup> 1Pet. 3:15.

The solution of the mocking infidel is prompt and simple. The faith of the unlearned Christian, he decides, *is* naught but ignorant prejudice, blind imitation, or prescription. What right, he asks, has such a man to an opinion here? What does he know of the extended and intricate discussions concerning the composition of the canon of Scripture, the history of these documents called inspired; the historical evidence of their genuineness; the correct state of their text? He does not even know one sentence of the dead languages in which they are composed. His pretended faith is, then, but the accident of his birth and rearing, and is as worthless as that of the Moslem, who believes in Allah and Mohammed only because he happened to be born in Arabia, or of the pagan, who worships imaginary gods only because his stupid mind has been drugged from infancy with the fables of polytheism.

The papist also assails the Protestant's rule of faith (which is the Bible alone, received on rational evidence) with almost the same cavils. And this is but one instance of several in which Rome is found leagued with the infidel enemies of Christ. "The Protestant rule of faith," says the popish controversialist, "is absurd and impossible. Protestantism professes to scout<sup>3</sup> an implicit faith as unworthy of a rational being. But how shall the convicted soul of the trembling sinner, who is most probably unfurnished with letters, and prevented by the exactions of secular labor from investigation (for such are the most of mankind), who is perhaps, in addition, urged by approaching death and harassed with sickness, perform that extensive work of inquiry necessary to an intelligent exercise of private judgment? Can he master these learned discussions? Can he become such an adept in the languages of Scripture as to verify, by his own comparison, the correctness of the translation which his minister has placed in his hand? Has he time to thread the thorny mazes of the expositors, and ascertain the orthodox interpretation of its language? But unless he has done all this, he has no right to assert a belief in the exercise of his private judgment. His faith, after all his boasts of intelligence and pretended scorn of the implicit belief of the docile son of the church, is but blind prescription, for this learned process is plainly impracticable for the bulk of mankind. The only difference is, that while the unlearned Romanist trusts implicitly to the authority of a holy, infallible church, the unlearned Protestant is led blindfolded by his heretical parson." Such is, in substance, the charge of the papist.

But we reply unanswerably, that from the very nature of the human mind, belief cannot possibly arise without evidence, any more than bodily vision can take place without light. This humble and teachable son of Rome must, then, have adequate knowledge that she is the true church, holy and infallible; that Christ has made her sovereign declaration the rule of faith to his soul, and promised salvation to him who adopts it; that some one system amidst the different ones promulgated in the course of ages, by different popes and councils, is the true creed of the church; that this is consistent with the teachings of the apostles, from whom the popes claim succession. Is there not here a field of inquiry at least as extensive and thorny as that which he has imagined for the Protestant? But unless it is investigated, the papist has no right to hold his rule of faith; for belief without evidence is a mockery. And what means have common men to ascertain the testimony of the church, save the instructions of their several priests? "What means have they to verify the teachings of their spiritual guides, by comparing them for themselves with the voluminous and contradictory *folios* of the Roman doctors? Manifestly, then, this boasted popish rule of faith comes practically to this, that to the individual layman his individual priest is his rule

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<sup>3</sup> "scout," to reject somebody or something with scorn or derision (archaic).

of faith, *his gospel!* And this priest is uninspired; he works no miracle or sign to guarantee his lofty claim; he is perhaps not recognized in other respects as even a man of personal integrity or sanctity. Thus terribly may their cavil be retorted.

These instances show us, my brethren, the direction in which lies the answer to the question with which we set out. Since Christ demands of us an intelligent faith, and that irrespective of our possession or lack of literary culture, it appears plain that he regards his gospel as containing its own self-evidencing light. The literary evidences of its divine origin, drawn by the learned from antiquity, have their value; but wherever the Bible is read with honesty, it presents, within itself, sufficient proof to evince that its claims are reasonable. Only on this supposition can its lofty and imperative attitude be justified.

The text presents us an apt instance of this species of internal evidence. Our Redeemer had come, an utter stranger, to the well of Sychar, and had preached his gospel to the Samaritans whom he met there. They were unworthy members of a hostile sect, knew nothing of Jesus of Nazareth, had made no effort, as they had no means, to verify his antecedents, or test his credentials as the Messiah whom they, in common with the Jews, expected. But yet reason showed them evidence enough of his claim in the matter of his discourse itself. They did not now need the preliminary inquiry. Common sense told them that a being who could depict the past life without any human means of learning it, and read the sinful heart, and teach such truths of grace and holiness and power, must be clothed with the divine sanction. With well-grounded conviction, the woman exclaimed, "Come, see a man which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" "And many more believed, because of his own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying, for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world." The truth which I desire to teach you from these words, my brethren, is this, that the contents of a message may be such as to demonstrate its authenticity, without external inquiry touching the messenger. The messages delivered by the ambassador may themselves constitute his sufficient credentials. So *the gospel brings its own self-evidencing light.*

That I may meet all such cavils as those of the infidel and papist in the most thorough and candid way, I shall suppose the plain, unlettered inquirer, with no book save his English Bible, and with no means or leisure for investigation, other than such as are demanded of every man by the supreme importance of the subject, honestly pondering the demand which he sees God there making upon his immediate and intelligent faith. I shall not indeed paint the Christian faith as the easy acquisition of folly and prejudice, or of an indolent and perfunctory glance at divine truths; for truths so grand and sacred as those of the gospel will appear, when demonstrated to the reason, to deserve and require the most laborious and impartial efforts of our faculties. But I shall suppose a case, involving no other learning or wisdom than that of the simple English reader weighing the contents of his English Bible with such diligence and impartiality as the worth of an immortal soul deserves. He has been told that the English which he reads is not the tongue in which the inspired men wrote; he is aware that the words before him profess to be a translation of the actual words of inspiration, carefully made by capable and honest, but fallible men; but he is unable to verify its fidelity for himself. The chief external proof of that point, within the reach of his mind, is but this, that he observes this English Bible possesses the confidence of all the honest, the pure, the wise, and the learned within his acquaintance. Now let us

suppose this unlettered inquirer setting himself, from this posture, to study this book, and to decide whether it contains within itself sufficiently obvious marks of divine origin.

We shall find that the only difficulty of our task is the universal diffusion of this light of evidence over the whole field of sacred Scripture. Our appreciation of its elements is the less easy because of the very fact that, as Bible readers, our minds have been immersed in and surrounded by it from youth. My effort to analyze it before you and define its parts is beset with a difficulty like that of the physicist who should endeavor to separate a beam of sunlight into its prismatic colors in an open field bathed with the radiance of noonday. Were he and his spectators shut up in a darkened hall to which only one pencil of sunlight was permitted to enter, the exhibition of his theorem would be easy. But amidst the glare of mid-day, the very profusion of the light would serve to obscure his result. So in my proof, my difficulty in causing you to see the analysis of the evidence arises only from the breadth and universal diffusion of the light.

I. *The manifest excellence and truth of THE CONTENTS and PROPOSED END of revelation commend it to our minds.*

The most immediate and universal result of human reflection is the conviction of a God, supreme first cause, uncreated Creator of all other things. The admission of this foundation truth may be regarded as the first and loudest requirement of our reason. Well, the Bible is in perfect harmony with this requirement, in that it does not begin by setting about the demonstration of the being of God, but *assumes* it as a first truth, needing no inspired assertion. But, then, while this book nobly confirms all that a correct reason could surmise of “his eternal power and god-head,” it proceeds to reveal to us a circle of perfect and infinite attributes, not only of omnipresence, power and omniscience, by which he appears competent to his whole grand work and supremacy, but of truth, righteousness, goodness and holiness, by which he is necessarily and intuitively seen to be worthy of adoring approval and delightful moral acquiescence. Here is a perfect object, concerning which right reason cannot but say that it is precisely thus God ought to exist; a full approbation of his excellence and glory can only be withheld at the cost of outraging our own undertakings and violating our own consciences. Does this book paint him with “clouds and darkness round about him?” Yet, “justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne.” Nor does our reason utter any clearer dictate than this, that since the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, he would not be truly God in whom there was to us no mystery.

Next, the most profound and intimate conclusion to which our reason impels us, from our belief in the being of God, is his providence, which we recognize as a silent, but supreme superintendence, impressing an order which is both wise and righteous upon all creatures and all their actions. But now we find that this truth is the very key-note of the system of this book. It proposes itself to us as nothing more than a history of this providence, which it perpetually asserts and explains. When we look into its teachings we see there familiarly asserted the very truths as to God’s ways and will which furnish us with the explanation of that course of nature, with its profoundest laws, which we observe around us. Providence and this book set forth precisely the same system of things. Yea, more; the least learned of the penmen of these Scriptures habitually announce, as their familiar maxims, those principles of the divine rule which are the conclusions of our widest experience, the inevitable tie between character and destiny, the dependence of posterity on the virtues of their fathers, the superintendence of a secret but almighty

will over the volitions of free agents. How strong the proof here that the book is from the same God whose control we obviously see and feel in our daily lives!

When we proceed from the description it gives of God's nature and ways to his law, we find every precept worthy of his rectitude. Whereas *we know* that all men are sinners, we read in this book a code of duties absolutely without taint of sin, which condemns by its spirituality every man under heaven, and yet commands, by its miraculous purity, the approval of every one whom it condemns. We find a multitude of points in this code which corrupt man could never have invented; and yet, when taught us here, they all appear evidently worthy of God, and just and wholesome for man. Especially when we read the Decalogue, do we find what no human virtue or genius could have constructed, and least of all the wisdom of an age and a race formed under the debasing influences of Egyptian polytheism—a digest of all human duties towards God and man, into ten propositions, so wondrously simple and comprehensive that nothing is omitted, and nothing confused. The understanding of a moral creature is inevitably impelled to conclude, that if the precepts of the Bible did not come from God, they are certainly worthy of that origin, and can be reasonably accounted for by no other. For else, this code of perfect holiness must be accounted the offspring of the very sin it condemns.

The marvellous consistency of these books among themselves is enough to show that they all came from one source, and that divine. They profess to have been written by different men, at intervals during more than a thousand years; and the internal evidence is abundant to show that this is in the main true. These authors were of different languages, characters and culture, legislators, warriors, scholars, kings, priests, herdsmen, peasants, mechanics, fishermen. Yet there is such perfect agreement, and that upon subjects the most profound and mysterious, that the fiercest criticisms of eager enemies have to this day been unable to convict them of any substantial discrepancy. Must they not have been taught all by one infallible mind?

But especially when we listen to the Bible delineation of our own moral state, do we find in our own sorrowful and guilty consciousness an echo which confesses the perfect justice and fidelity of the description. This wonderful book does what no other, not the most ancient, history or tradition attempts; it gives the explanation of that insoluble mystery: how a ruined and polluted creature could be found amidst the handiwork of a creator whom we must believe to be at once omnipotent, benevolent and holy. It solves the problem by telling us that “God did create man upright; and *he* sought out many inventions;”<sup>4</sup> that after man proceeded from his Maker's hand, holy and happy, he fell and was ruined by the sin of his first father. But this is not the chief fact. I point to those clear and decisive statements which sacred Scripture makes of the most profound and melancholy revelations of our inner consciousness; of the emptiness and vanity which our experience so bitterly realizes in all those terrene<sup>5</sup> objects to the pursuit of which we are all, nevertheless, obstinately impelled by a perverted heart; of the ineradicable spring of sinful desire within; of a will freely, and yet certainly, directed against the *dicta*<sup>6</sup> of our own better conscience, by which will we are ever prompted to choose that evil which we are ever compelled to reprobate; of “a certain fearful looking for of judgment”<sup>7</sup> which causes us to recoil from that immortality

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<sup>4</sup> Eccl. 7:29.

<sup>5</sup> “terrene,” worldly or earthly, as opposed to heavenly.

<sup>6</sup> “*dicta*,” authoritative pronouncement.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 10:27 (AV).

which should be our glory and joy. And of a sorrowful longing, without hope, for moral renovation, which yet man is ever too weak and sinful to effectuate. Now I ask, by what wisdom is it that this book hath revealed an insight so much deeper, more honest, and more searching, than any human philosophy, into this abyss of our miserable consciousness? When man's guilty soul avouches its truth in every groan of his remorse and his anguish, does it not appear obviously the utterance of him whose eyes behold, whose eyelids try the hearts of the children of men? What artificer of imposture hath ever been wont to deal thus with the victims whom he would befool?

But among all the contents of this book, it is its *professed chief end* which commends itself to the reason with most commanding force. For the most cursory reading of this book shows us that its burden everywhere, its one great, perpetual announcement, its good news (*evangel*), is the proposal of a work which, if practicable, cannot but challenge the approval of every right mind, with a self-evidencing light as clear as our consciousness of our own existence; a work the depreciation of whose excellence would betray at once a disregard of self monstrous and suicidal, and a satanic malignity towards our fellows; a work whose mere proposal should be so full of blessing and glory, that the refutation or surrender of the hope should be resisted by man's soul with the agony of despair. This proposed work is that which no other reformer or philanthropist has ever presumed to suggest; one which the ceaseless yearning of our misery even had not emboldened us to ask. This proposal is no less than the offer of redemption to man for the glory of God, a complete deliverance from guilt by justification, and from corruption by sanctification. How unique, how satisfying to man's necessities, how worthy of heaven, is this glorious end! It is not like the vain, wicked and impious dreams of philosophy, or of polytheism, or of Mohammedanism, the proposal to find the elements of restoration where, from the nature of the case, it is impossible they can exist, in the nature itself that is ruined; or to set aside the obvious doom of man's ill-desert, leaving God's justice and holiness outraged; or to endow a corrupt soul with an immortal blessedness which is incompatible with its sinfulness. No; this gospel offer goes to the foundation of the needed work. It proposes to engage the omnipotence, love and wisdom of God himself, both to satisfy divine justice, and to restore man's ruin in sin; so that the deliverance shall meet fully every demand of offended heaven, and every necessity of fallen humanity, and endow us with a new blessedness as righteous as it is precious, and as everlasting as it is righteous. Must not every right soul exclaim, Oh! if this news may but be true; never can there descend from the skies a word so dear to man, so worthy of God! At its announcement must not every most pious and reverent aspiration for his honor concur with every holy and legitimate longing of the hungry soul for its own good, and every impulse of benevolence for others, in the ardent wish that the reason *may find* full authority and evidence the glad news *is true*? And why should the most jealous caution resist that joyful conclusion? Methinks there is abundant confirmation in the message itself; a message too grand and strange to be the fiction of man's folly; too pure, and noble, and righteous, and benevolent, to be the invention of a malignant impostor!

## II. *The FITNESS of the CHARACTER and FUNCTION of the Redeemer.*

If one were sick and full of anguish with a mortal disease, and an entire stranger were to come to him and profess the purpose of kindly healing, every man must say that the proposal is every way right and good. To test the character of this stranger, it would only remain to see whether his secret intention and his ability corresponded with his profession. So let us now consider that Redeemer whom this book proposes to us as the physician of our soul's malady. Time

forbids my staying to argue the constitution of his person, as God in man, and thus able for his undertaking; or to unfold the perfect adaptation of the offices he assumes to bear, as our prophet, priest, and king, to our necessities; or to dwell upon his miracles and predictions as divine sanctions of his claims. Moreover, I promised that I would not go outside of those materials of proof which the plain reader can find in his English Bible. All that I claim on the above points is, that the reader's common sense must approve *the fitness of the character and function which Jesus Christ seems to assume for the redeeming work which he professes to undertake*. If there can be a real salvation for sinners, it must be by atonement and new birth. And these must be wrought by one who has more than human power, to renew us, and more than human independence and worth, to pay his life for a world of sinners. Now, such do we find Christ's claims in this book. He is here said to be both Son of man and Son of God, in one person; to have authority to lay down his life and take it again; to have given this life for the sins of the world; and to exercise a divine power in baptizing the hearts of sinners with the Holy Ghost. The question is, are these wondrous claims true? I offer you, in proof, the lovely and perfect *character* of Jesus as painted by the evangelists. We read these four histories, and we find there described a being who, from his cradle to his cross, was never guilty of a fault, or even a foible. He is represented to us as having displayed every virtue of the perfect man, along with the majesty and might of deity. His love and beneficence were only equalled by his truth and rectitude. His only occupation on earth was doing good; his only ambition was to bear away, or at least to lighten, the sorrows of others. To the claims of selfishness, avarice, ambition, he displayed a lofty insensibility, such as no human character has ever approached, yea, such as the imagination of man had never dreamed of imputing to its most glowing creations. With boundless power at his command, he was never once seen to employ it to gratify, or aggrandize, or avenge himself; it was used only to bless others, while he remained so poor that he "had not where to lay his head."<sup>8</sup> When he opened his mouth, it was to speak as never man spake; his discourses breathed only purity, wisdom, and love. Heaven and earth alike pronounce this character holy, harmless, and undefiled; the utmost malice could bring no taint upon it by the foulest arts of subornation;<sup>9</sup> the pagan procurator who condemned him testified that no fault could be found in him; the very traitor who betrayed him was constrained to declare him innocent, as he went, lashed by the furies of remorse, to his own place. His sanctity was tested by the fiery furnace of slander, persecution and murder; yet there was no alloy; equally meek and magnanimous, with a spirit as inflexible in its moral courage as divine in its forgiveness, he only shone with the purer radiance in the furnace. But why do I attempt to describe that which is indescribable? The moral beauty of this character so reveals itself to the intuitions of the humblest mind, as well as to the most cultivated, that your own conceptions of it perpetually transcends in glory all the images of rhetoric. I thank God that it is so; and that a complete portraiture is as needless as it is impossible. For herein is the value of this character, that it requires no training, nor logic, nor effort for its apprehension; it commends itself as immediately to the heart of the child or peasant as of the wise or learned.

Now, is this picture authentic? Did this man, Jesus, truly speak these words, and live this life, and die this death in Judea? Then, *what he said* I must believe to be true; true by the evidence

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<sup>8</sup> Mat. 8:20, "And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." (AV).

<sup>9</sup> "subornation," the crime of inducing another to commit a crime.

of this spotless integrity, love and faithfulness; true by all the irresistible beauty of his character. To tell me that such virtues as his could be the inventor of a lie, and that a lie so base, so unfeeling, so impious as this would have been, outrages both my reason and my heart; as though one should tell me that night, with her blackness of darkness, was the parent of the light, and death the author of life. What would you have said to me if I, in my youth, after witnessing from my infancy the steady, consistent integrity of my honored father, and after owing the happiness of so many years to his faithfulness and love, had refused credit to his word on the pretext that I had no knowledge of the thing he spake? You would have decided, with disgust, that I showed the head of a fool, in that I could not be blind to the evidence of such consistency, and the heart of a scoundrel, in that I refused the instinctive homage of my confidence to such excellence. Even so; if you now saw such a being as Jesus is described, performing his ministry of love and sanctity under your observation, you would be compelled to yield credit to his word. *When I contemplate the personal character of Jesus Christ, I feel that I can trust everything to his veracity.*

But the objection may be imagined that this life and character are not under the inspection of this plain reader of the English Bible as a present reality; all that he knows is that this book in his hands, which professes to be a correct translation of certain histories, said to be eighteen centuries old, describes such a life and character. I reply, this is enough. For *there* is a wondrous description; the question whence it came must be answered. Only two answers are possible; either it is a fiction, or it is not. Will any one dare to say the former? Then he must hold that a company of liars have composed the noblest and most beautiful model of truth ever seen among men; that the loveliest image of virtue which has ever entranced the admiration of the wise and good is the invention of the most loathsome vice. For how foul and cruel and profane must have been the temper which could deliberately set itself to forge such a cheat, in mockery at once of God's majesty and mercy and of man's woes and dangers? That an exploit of genius which the noblest intellect and heart of scholar[ship] has never equalled, and which the most profound critics declare to be an inimitable achievement should have been accomplished by men who were ignorant at once and base; and that these hateful imposters expended all this miraculous art in constructing an imaginary picture of which the only apparent result is to condemn their own falsehood in inventing it—this is, indeed, not only a greater miracle than the miracles of the gospel, but an impossibility. He who can believe this is more credulous than the most insolent skeptic has represented the humble Christian.

Here, then, is the result of these converging lines of evidence; that while all else in the Bible is manifestly worthy of God, so far as it is comprehended, this great proposal of the Bible, that man shall be restored to obedience, holiness and happiness, is so self-evidently right and good that to reject it is at once a crime and a folly. And that the Redeemer, sent to do the glorious work, presents a character so consistent with his proposed mission that reason and virtue both imperatively demand for him our full confidence.

III. *The LIVES of the people who make the Bible the RULE of their spiritual lives VERIFY the results indicated in the Bible.*

We now make a third appeal to the common sense of our supposed inquirer, the materials of which are presented by every sane and honest man's intelligence. We ask him to verify the authenticity or falsehood of this gospel news by its effects on society around him. Cast your eye, my friend, upon the people within your own knowledge. You see a society, embracing a part of

these people, called the *Christian Church*, which professes to have made this book the rule of its spiritual life. Now, the demonstration is in this fact, that *the people in this society verify the very results indicated in the book*. Among some of them you observe an inconsistency between holy professions and unholy conduct, expressly foretold by the book, and presenting you with an impressive instance of the malignity and *virus* of that disease of sin which the book imputes to natural men. But among others of them, you observe, what your Bible has also expressly predicted, instances of the sincere adoption and efficacious influence of the gospel; and uniformly you see that the character of these is lovely and deserving, just in proportion to the degree of fulness with which they embrace and feel the truths of their Bibles. The effect of the book on their character, precisely as they permit it to have its legitimate effect, is to produce a result of such self-evident excellence that to condemn it, or to refuse it your hearty approval, is a manifest outrage against your own reason and conscience. Moreover, you notice that not only are those the best people who most sincerely embrace and follow this book, but that nearly all that is truly good in society flows directly or indirectly from the influence of this book and these people. You think that you discover here and there a gentleman who is honorable and benevolent, or a lady who is pure and amiable, who is not the votary of the Bible? Yes, but when you investigate the origin of these persons, you probably find that they derived these lovely qualities toward their fellowmen from Christian parents who drew all their graces from this holy book. Now, I appeal to your common sense: “Doth an evil tree bear good fruit? Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?” If the Bible is false and infidelity true, how is it that error here bears the precious fruits of truth? If you still deny that this gospel is from God, then it would appear that, so preposterous are the conditions of man’s existence here, it is necessary for him to believe a lie in order to make the nearest approach to his true welfare and the true ends of his existence.

But this is only a part of the argument. When you study a little the effects of the Bible upon those who are most obviously its sincere receivers, you perceive that it has been the instrument of making a change in them for which nature cannot account. You saw that the book promised to its recipients a quickening of the soul dead in sin by God’s own power—a new birth by the Holy Ghost. Astonishing, amazing promise! But here are some instances in which it is verified. Here and there, among these nominal or questionable Christians, are some who present the undoubted evidence of a long and consistent life that they are truly actuated by a heavenly principle. Now you, my friend, know enough of human nature, without any Bible, to perceive that this principle is not naturally in man, and that there is no power in his nature to generate it. You see all men, you see yourself, uniformly, originally, certainly devoted to the world and self-will, in preference to God. It is manifestly the natural law of our radical dispositions of heart. You may sometimes or often have had *religious* thoughts and purposes; but you are perfectly aware that they were not *godly or heavenly*; they were all but the efforts which self-love, in the form of *awakened fear*, exacted of your unwilling souls. You know that you have always yielded to or at least harbored the unconquerable desire to return to sin as soon as the spur of remorse was a little withdrawn. But these genuine Christians not only refrain from sin, but hate it; they not only submit to duty, but delight in it. They manifest a permanent revolution of soul from self and sin to godliness. Your own understandings also show you very plainly that such a change as this speaks more than earthly power; that the stream of volitions cannot rise of themselves higher than their own fountain in the evil heart; that the attractions of heavenly-mindedness cannot, by their mere native power as inducements, reverse that disposition which is naturally dead to them.

These men were obviously “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John i. 13.)

Here, then, is proof of the divine origin of the gospel as practical and impressive as a visible miracle. The book promises such a change to those who embrace it; the change is above the powers of nature; but lo! in these cases where the truth is heartily received it actually occurs. What verification could be more complete?

And now, will any one attempt to break the force of this evidence by pointing me to the multitude of spurious or doubtful Christians? Is it thus insinuated that the reality of this divine change in any case is uncertain? I reply: What of the many counterfeits? Is not their existence precisely what Jesus Christ predicted? The question is, whether there has not been at least one within the range of your own observation whose Christian integrity was undoubted? For a single case reveals the finger of God. And I will not believe that you have been so unblessed as never to have possessed at least one such heavenly-minded friend. I point you back to the chambers of your own memory; I call up the dear and venerated forms of your dead who dwell enshrined in your heart’s recollections; I point you to that revered relative, most probably a sainted woman, your aunt, your gentle sister, your mother, whose Christian love was at once the sweetest blessing and the holiest lesson of your life. Recall, I pray you, the light of that pure example, whose benignant beams filled your home with peace and quiet joy. Remember that steadfast, generous heart, whose unselfish affection was the solace of all your sorrows; the unwearied life of magnanimous self-forgetfulness; the generous patience which bore all your ingratitude and waywardness, and took no revenge, save by blessing; the unquenched fire of devotion burning on with steady flame in privacy, in prosperity, in sorrow; and that calm, radiant face with which she was wont to come down at twilight from the chamber of her secret communings with God. Especially do I remind you of the end, which set the seal upon the consistent testimony of the whole life; when you saw the gentle sufferer lie upon her dying bed, and receive[d] the last blessing of a love whose unselfish fire death could not quench; when you beheld her awaiting, peaceful, weak, it may be, and prostrate and contrite, yet unappalled, the approach of that last enemy, whose most distant threat, as you well know, fills your guilty heart with shuddering, and witnessed her triumph over his sting by the strength of her Redeemer—ah! *you know* that there was in that breast a principle which you have not and which the world cannot bestow. It was the new nature received through this gospel. I testify unto you that God gave you this holy example, and blessed you with this Christian love, in order to convince you, by the demonstration of a present, living wonder of his grace, that his gospel is no cunningly devised fable. Perhaps you have said to yourself that had you been an eye-witness of the reputed miracles of Jesus, had you stood with those Jews of Bethany beside the opening grave, and seen Lazarus come forth at the call of the divine voice, bound with grave-clothes, you too would have believed. But you ask, How do I know that these narratives are authentic? How can I verify these professed histories across the chasm of eighteen centuries? I reply: Here God gave you, by the ministry of this same gospel, a moral miracle as unquestionable, and if you consider it aright, as impressive as these—the quickening of a dead soul.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this argument see “The Light of a Holy Example,” in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.*, 4 vols. ed. by C.R. Vaughan (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890; reprint (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), I:107-114. Here find the

Thus the Bible contains, in its own message and effects, evidence which should be sufficient for the common mind, if honest. This evidence has been represented to you here as appealing, not only to the reason, but to the conscience. Will any hearer object for this cause to its strict, demonstrative force? Shall it be urged against me, that I have presented a sentimental, rather than a logical, view of these evidences? I claim that this is no derogation from its just force; it is rather the glory and strength of the argument. For the moral judgments of the soul which I have addressed are the highest, the most intuitive, and the most imperative functions of the reason. The student of numbers has a rational judgment of the truth of this statement, that in division, the larger the divisor, the smaller the quotient. So has he a conscientious judgment that Judas was criminal for betraying his Master; and it is attended with a lively sentiment of reprobation. But is the mind any less certain that the latter proposition is true than that the arithmetical one was true? Not a whit. When conscience announces her verdict for the right and the just, it is as supremely rational as the clearest perceptions of the true.

Moral and spiritual judgments are no less logical than the scientific. But there is an all-important difference, my hearers, between them; a difference in favor of my cause. The moral truth, when recognized, brings to your soul instantaneous and imperative obligation. Your conviction immediately binds you to the corresponding right action, by a claim which cannot be resisted or postponed without criminality. We have been examining the proposition that in every division, the greater the divisor, the smaller the quotient. Suppose you deny that this abstract statement is universally true? I shall say that you must have a queer sort of mind! Suppose you agree with me that the proposition is universally true? What then? Why, nothing! unless you choose to enter upon some such arithmetical processes. But now I come to you with a different, a moral proposition: I tell you that in yonder poor-house there is a venerable man, sick, naked, friendless and destitute, and I show you evidence which identifies this pitiable sufferer with the generous benefactor of your youth, long lost to your knowledge. Your mind must needs admit the logical force of that evidence. And now, what? There immediately emerge to you the obligations of gratitude, of beneficent ACTION, requiting your suffering friend; and to refuse, or even delay that action, brands you as criminal. So, in this gospel argument, the appeal to the rational intuition is partly moral, and not merely scientific; and therefore *faith is a duty, and unbelief a sin*. Thus the cavil is exploded which objected against the gospel system, for erecting the soul's state of belief into a grace or a crime. It is because the belief on Christ involves right judgments of conscience and choice of heart, as well as correct notions of the intellect. This solemn trait of the gospel is, therefore, strictly consistent. Hearer, will you now do your duty by "becoming obedient to the faith?"<sup>11</sup>

I now take you to witness that, in establishing the truth of this gospel, I have used no other materials than that familiar knowledge and common-sense which the humblest reader may bring to his English Bible, if he is honest. Here, then, is the mode in which it becomes a practical rule of faith to common men. And here is the answer to the sneer, that the faith of such Christians is but senseless prescription or prejudice. To the right heart, the gospel is its own sufficient witness.

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story (told without reference to the true names) of the conversion of the author's uncle Francis Dabney, through the evidence of sovereign grace in the life of Robert's beloved sister Betty.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 6:7.

From this point of view you will see it to be a reasonable proposition, that the best book to be read by him who is inquiring into the evidence of the Bible is the Bible itself. This is no paradox. There is a stranger who wishes to be received as a trustworthy person. He offers you certain testimonials from abroad which, he claims, will prove satisfactory when verified. But you, as a practical man, thrust them aside, and prefer to converse with the stranger himself. If you can do so frequently and intimately enough, to gain a thorough personal acquaintance of your own, you prefer to judge him for yourself. Thus do with the Bible. Search the Scriptures honestly and diligently, and you will find out whether they are from God, or whether they speak of themselves.

#### RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

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