

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DIS-
COURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER XX.

ON CONFORMITY TO THE WORLD.

DEAR SIR,

YOU will, perhaps, be surprised to see my thoughts on your query in print, rather than to receive them by post, as you expected. But as the subject of it is of general concern, I hope that you will not be displeased that I have taken this method. It would do honour to the pen of an able casuist, and might be of considerable service in the present day, clearly to explain the force of the apostle's precept, "Be not conformed to this world;" and to state the just boundary between a sinful compliance with the world, and that scrupulous singularity which springs from a self-righteous principle, and a contracted view of the spirit and liberty of the gospel. To treat this point accurately, would require a treatise, rather than a letter; I only undertake to offer you a few hints; and, indeed, when the mind is formed to a spiritual taste, a simple desire to be guided by the word and Spirit of God, together with a due attention to our own experience, will, in most practical cases, supersede the necessity of long and elaborate disquisitions.

By the world, in the passage alluded to, Rom. xii. 2, I suppose the apostle means the men of the world, in distinction from believers; these, not having the love of God in their hearts, or his fear before their eyes, are, of course, engaged in such pursuits and practices as are inconsistent with our holy calling, and in which we cannot imitate or comply with them, without hurting our peace and our profession. We are, therefore, bound to avoid conformity to them in all such instances; but we are not obliged to decline all intercourse with the world, or to impose restraints upon ourselves, when the scriptures do not restrain us, in order to make us as unlike the world as possible. To instance in a few particulars:

It is not necessary, perhaps, it is not lawful, wholly to renounce the society of the world. A mistake of this kind took place in the early ages of Christianity, and men (at first, perhaps, with a sincere desire of serving God without distraction) withdrew into deserts and uninhabited places, and wasted their lives at a distance from their fellow creatures. But unless we could flee from ourselves likewise, this would afford us no advantage; so long as we carry our own wicked hearts with us, we shall be exposed to temptation, go where we will. Besides, this would be thwarting the end of our vocation. Christians are to be the salt and the light of the world, conspicuous as cities set upon a hill; they are commanded to "let their light shine before men, that they, beholding their good works, may glorify their Father who is in heaven." This injudicious deviation from the paths of nature and providence, gave occasion, at length, to the vilest abominations;

and men, who withdrew from the world under the pretence of retirement, became the more wicked and abandoned, as they lived more out of public view and observation.

Nor are we at liberty, much less are we enjoined, to renounce the duties of relative life, so as to become careless in the discharge of them. Allowances should, indeed, be made for the distresses of persons newly awakened, or under the power of temptation, which may, for a time, so much engross their thoughts, as greatly to indispose them for their bounden duty. But in general, the proper evidence of true christians, is, not merely that they can talk about divine things, but that, by the grace of God, they live and act agreeable to the rules of his word, in the state in which his providence has placed them, whether as masters or servants, husbands or wives, parents or children: bearing rule, or yielding obedience, as in his sight. Diligence and fidelity in the management of temporal concerns, though observable in the practice of many worldly men, may be maintained without a sinful conformity to the world.

Neither are we required to refuse a moderate use of the comforts and conveniences of life, suitable to the station which God has appointed us in the world. The spirit of self-righteousness and will-worship works much in this way, and supposes that there is something excellent in long fastings, in abstaining from pleasant food, in wearing meaner clothes than is customary with those in the same rank of life, and in many other austerities and singularities not commanded by the word of God. And many persons, who are in the main sincere, are grievously burdened with scruples respecting the use of lawful things. It is true, there is need of a constant watch, lest what is lawful in itself become hurtful to us by its abuse. But these outward strictnesses may be carried to great lengths, without a spark of true grace, and even without the knowledge of the true God. The mortifications and austerities practised by the Brahmins in India (if the accounts we have of them be true) are vastly more severe than the most zealous effects of modern superstition in our country. There is a strictness which arises rather from ignorance than knowledge, is wholly conversant about externals, and gratifies the spirit of self as much in one way as it seems to retrench it in another. A man may almost starve his body to feed his pride; but to those who, fear and serve the Lord, every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the precept is very extensive and important. "Be not conformed to the world." As believers, we are strangers and pilgrims upon earth. Heaven is our country, and the Lord is our King. We are to be known and noticed as his subjects, and, therefore, it is his pleasure, that we do not speak the language, or adopt the customs of the

land in which we sojourn. We are not to conform to the world, as we did in the days of our ignorance. And though we have received the principles of grace, and have tasted of the goodness of the Lord, the admonition is still needful; for we are renewed but in part, and are liable to be drawn aside to our hurt, by the prevalence of evil examples and customs around us.

We must not conform to the spirit of the world. As members of society, we have a part to act in it, in common with others. But if our business is the same, our principles and ends are to be entirely different. Diligence in our respective callings is, as I have already observed, commendable, and our duty; but not with the same views which stimulate the activity of the men of the world. If they rise early, and take rest late, their endeavours spring from, and terminate in self, to establish and increase their own importance, to add house to house, and field to field, that, like the builders of Babel, they may get themselves a name, or provide means for the gratification of their sinful passions. If they succeed, they sacrifice to their own net; if they are crossed in their designs, they are filled with anxiety and impatience; they either murmur or despond. But a Christian is to pursue his lawful calling with an eye to the providence of God, and with submission to his wisdom. Thus, so far as he acts in the exercise of faith, he cannot be disappointed. He casts his care upon his heavenly Father, who has promised to take care of him. What he gives, he receives with thankfulness, and is careful, as a faithful steward, to improve it for the furtherance of the cause of God, and the good of mankind; and if he meets with losses and crosses, he is not disconcerted, knowing that all his concerns are under a divine direction; that the Lord, whom he serves, chooses for him better than he could choose for himself: and that his best treasure is safe, out of the reach of the various changes to which all things in the present state are liable.

We must not conform to the maxims of the world. The world, in various instances, calls evil good, and good evil. But we are to have recourse to the law and to the testimony, and to judge of things by the unerring word of God, uninfluenced by the determination of the great, or the many. We are to obey God rather than man, though, upon this account, we may expect to be despised or reviled, to be made a gazing-stock or a laughing-stock to those who set his authority at defiance. We must bear our testimony to the truth as it is in Jesus, avow the cause of his despised people, and walk in the practice of universal obedience, patiently endure reproaches and labour to overcome evil with good. Thus we shall show that we are not ashamed of him. And there is an hour coming, when he will not be ashamed of us, who have followed him, and borne his cross, in the midst of a perverse generation, but will own our worthless names before the assembled world.

We must not conform to the world in their amusements and diversions.

We are to mix with the world so far as our necessary and providential connections engage us; so far as we have a reasonable expectation of doing, or getting good, and no further. “What fellowship hath light with darkness, or what concord hath Christ with Belial?” What call can a believer have into those places and companies, where everything tends to promote a spirit of dissipation; where the fear of God has no place; where things are purposely disposed to inflame, or indulge corrupt and sinful appetites and passions, and to banish all serious thoughts of God and ourselves? If it is our duty to redeem time, to walk with God, to do all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to follow the example which he set us when he was upon earth, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling; it must of course be our duty to avoid a conformity with the world in those vain and sensual diversions, which stand in as direct contradiction to a spiritual frame of mind as darkness to light.

The leading desires of every person under the influence of gospel-principles, will be to maintain a habitual communion with God in his own soul, and to manifest the power of his grace in the sight of men. So far as a Christian is infected by a conformity to the spirit, maxims, and sinful customs of the world, these desires will be disappointed. Fire and water are not more opposite than that peace of God which passeth all understanding, and that poor precarious pleasure which is sought in a compliance with the world; a pleasure (if worthy the name) which grieves the Spirit of God and stupefies the heart. Whoever, after having tasted that the Lord is gracious, has been prevailed on to make the experiment, and to mingle with the world’s vanities, has certainly thereby brought a damp upon his experience, and indisposed himself for the exercise of prayer, and the contemplation of divine truths. And if any are not sensible of a difference in this respect, it is because the poison has taken a still deeper effect, so as to benumb their spiritual senses. Conformity to the world is the bane of many professors in this day. They have found a way, as they think, to serve both God and mammon. But because they are double-minded, they are unstable; they make no progress; and notwithstanding their frequent attendance upon ordinances, they are lean from day to day; a form of godliness, a scheme of orthodox notions they may attain to, but they will remain destitute of the life, power, and comfort of religion, so long as they cleave to those things which are incompatible with it.

Conformity to the world is equally an obstruction in the way of those who profess a desire of glorifying God in the sight of men. Such professors do rather dishonour him; by their conduct, as far as in them lies, they declare, that they do not find the religion of the gospel answer their expectations; that it does not afford them the satisfaction they once hoped for from it; and that therefore they are forced to seek relief from the world. They

grieve the people of God by their compliances, and ofttimes they mislead the weak, and, by their examples encourage them to venture upon the like liberties, which otherwise they durst not have attempted. They embolden the wicked likewise in their evil ways, while they see a manifest inconsistency between their avowed principles and their practice; and thus they cause the ways of truth to be evil spoken of.—The paper constrains me to conclude abruptly. May the Lord enable you and me to lay this subject to heart, and to pray that we may, on the one hand, rightly understand and prize our Christian liberty; and, on the other hand, be preserved from that growing evil, a conformity to the world.

I am, &c.