

Christian Messenger.

A REPOSITORY OF RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE.

"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

NEW SERIES. VOL. VIII. No. 41.

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1863.

WHOLE SERIES. VOL. XXVII. No. 41.

Religious.

[From the Baptist Magazine.]

"In the Spirit, and not in the Letter."

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There are three passages in which St. Paul draws a broad distinction between the spirit and the letter (Rom. ii. 29; vii. 6; 2 Cor. iii. 6). In the first of these the letter means the ordinance of circumcision; the spirit that purity of heart which the ordinance of circumcision was designed to symbolize. In the second the letter means rigid conformity with the literal requirements of the law; the spirit, the habit of worshipping God in spirit and in truth. In the third the letter means the law; the spirit, the Gospel.

It is not our intention to enter further into the investigation of these texts, but we shall endeavour to draw from them a somewhat comprehensive principle, and to show how important that principle is.

In much of our ordinary speech these terms, letter and spirit, are employed, and we recognise a strong distinction between them. We speak of the letter and of the spirit of a law; and, without this distinction, the *summa jus* is, in many instances, certain to prove the *summa injuria*. In all ironical speech it is, of course, most essential to distinguish between the letter and the spirit; for, without this distinction, the irony is not irony, but plain untruth. So with all hyperbolic speech: if the distinction between the letter and the spirit be not observed, the hyperbole is simply a lie. This distinction, therefore, is one with which we are all practically conversant. To whom are we indebted for it? So far as it is expressed in these particular terms we seem to owe it to St. Paul. Stanley, commenting on 2 Cor. iii. 6, says, "We now frequently contrast 'the letter' and 'the spirit'; yet it is this very passage which has made that contrast familiar to us." Why, in any case, the letter should be one thing and the spirit another, the statement one thing, its meaning another, we cannot stay to inquire. The difference may arise, in part, from those imperfections which seem inseparable from all human speech. Nothing is more common than the maxim, "Say what you mean;" but, in many cases, nothing is more difficult than to "say what you mean," exactly what you mean, that, and neither more, nor less, nor other; and often, when we have honestly done our best to say what we mean, the etymologist, pulling our words up by the roots, shows us that we have said something very different from what we meant. But as we know that all sensible people recognise the distinction between the letter and the spirit, we feel that we need not be so very exact; we feel that, although in irony and in hyperbole we may say a thousand things which in the letter are utterly false, there is no fear of our being misunderstood. Our veracity will not be called in question because we term some blockhead a wiseacre [wise-sayer], or because we say, concerning some popular preacher, that all the world is running after him.

Obviously, then, this distinction between letter and spirit is very commonly observed, and must be very commonly observed; otherwise, however carefully we weigh and measure our words, we shall give and receive a thousand false, absurd, and mischievous impressions. Much and very much of what we say to others, much and very much of what others say to us, must be taken "in the spirit, and not in the letter." The object of this paper is to show the importance of observing this distinction in handling Scripture. The fact that Scripture is the word of God does not by any means guarantee a perfect conformity of letter with spirit; for, though it be the word of God, it is written in the language of men; and the language of men is no safe medium of thought, excepting with this distinction between the letter and the spirit. If we take man's word always in the letter, we shall often be misled; and if we take God's word always in the letter, a similar result will ensue. It is much to be able to say, with regard to anything which we wish to establish as a truth, "Thus it is written;" but "Thus

it is written" is not always enough. Thus it is written, "Ye strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel;" thus it is written, "The poison of asps is under their lips;" thus it is written, "Ye are the salt of the earth;" and thus it is so written in a thousand passages, as to necessitate the observance of this distinction, "In the spirit, and not in the letter." In fact, so much of the Scripture is metaphorical, that it seems perfectly correct to say that there is probably no other book in which it is of so much importance to distinguish between the spirit and the letter.

It is not difficult to show that from the neglect of this distinction much error has sprung, is springing, and is likely still to spring. Let us notice a few of those cases in which, through taking the letter rather than the spirit, men have been misled to their hurt. The Jewish people furnish many illustrations of this serious and most injurious mistake. Thus, standing by the letter of their Scriptures, the Jews regarded themselves as the children of Abraham, and thought that the plea, "We have Abraham to our father," would save them from the wrath to come. Now just observe how clearly and beautifully Paul sets forth the spirit of Abrahamic descent as contrasted with the letter: "Know ye not that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham;" "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." If the Jew had seen the spirit of this relationship, he would have learned that physical descent from the great patriarch was nothing; that, though Abraham was, according to the letter, the father of the Jews, according to the spirit he was the father of the faithful. The spirit would have led the Jew to the faith that saves; the letter led him to the presumption and the folly which destroy.

Consider the manner in which the Jews understood the prophecies concerning Christ. They did not recognise their highly metaphorical character. Blinded by worldliness of soul, charmed with the pictures of material plenty, power, and splendour under which Christ and his kingdom were set forth, they clung to the letter; and the consequence was that when Christ came they would not acknowledge him; he was not at all such a one as their literal views of prophecy had led them to expect. Had they diligently studied the spirit of those prophecies, had they given to every scene and circumstance in the prophecy that nobler meaning which their acquaintance with figurative language ought to have suggested, then, when Jesus appeared, they would scarcely have failed of perceiving that, so far from being unlike the promised Christ, he was precisely the person whose coming had been foretold. Thus we may well say, with reference to the interpretation of those prophecies, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

But now let us see how this distinction between letter and spirit affects us, how far we have observed it or not observed it, and with what results. Notice, for example, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. With regard to each there are passages which, taken in a strictly literal sense, most certainly uphold the dogmas of baptismal regeneration and the real presence: "Baptism doth also save us;" "The washing of regeneration;" "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God;" "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." Press these passages literally, and it will be hard to escape the dogma of baptismal regeneration in its grossest form. "This is my body; . . . this is my blood;" "Except ye eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man, ye have no life in you;" "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" Insist upon the letter of these passages, and surely these consequences follow, that the body and blood of Christ are verily and indeed present in the bread and wine, and that unless a man partake of this ordinance he cannot be saved. We all know how widely this interpretation by the letter has prevailed and still prevails, not only in the Roman Catholic Church but in many Protestant communions also; and we all know what huge mischief this interpretation by the letter has wrought; how it has filled people with superstitious fears and

equally superstitious hopes; how it has encouraged them to live and die in sin, sustained by the relief that, having been baptized, they are born again, and that, having partaken of the Lord's Supper, they are in a state of certain salvation. Our readers do not need to be informed concerning the spirit of the passages just quoted, but it will be seen that volumes might be written on the mischief which has resulted from neglecting to apply to these ordinances the great maxim, "In the spirit, and not in the letter."

When we look at some of our Saviour's precepts, at some of the very noblest of his precepts, we find that to accept them and act upon them in the letter would be a course productive of most undesirable results. For example, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and brethren, and sisters, he cannot be my disciple." The letter of this statement would destroy every one of those natural affections the preservation of which, in all their purity and strength, we know to be one of the highest Christian duties. "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple." Here the letter is destructive of all secular comfort: it is dead against the acquisition and possession of any kind of worldly property. And multitudes have acted upon the letter of these statements; have not only forsaken their kindred, but also taken upon them vows of poverty, and shut themselves up in monasteries and nunneries, thinking thus to comply with Christ's will. The spirit of such words is plainly this, that Christ should be the supreme object of our love, and that we should not suffer either natural ties or secular pursuits to stand in the way of our faithfully and lovingly serving him. So again: "Labour not for the meat that perisheth;" "Take no thought for the morrow." Here the letter would destroy all industry and enterprise, and reduce us to sheer beggary; but the spirit of such injunctions is obviously this, that we are not to allow our hearts to be engrossed by worldly things, and that we are not to distrust the providential care of God. The letter encourages imprudence, idleness, recklessness: the spirit, on the contrary, encourages a higher regard for things spiritual than for things temporal, and a feeling of strong and unwavering confidence in God. Our Saviour has given us precepts intended to check and keep under control the passion of resentment: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also;" "And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also." These precepts, acted upon in the letter, would often do more harm than good, even to the offender. Our Saviour himself did not observe them in the letter. Sometimes, when his enemies would have smitten him, he went out of their way; and on one occasion, when an enemy did smite him, he remonstrated with the assailant, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?" The letter of these commandments would allow violence, injustice, and cruelty to go on unchecked, would overturn all the foundations of society: the spirit of these commandments simply seeks to cultivate a meek, a quiet, a patient, a forgiving disposition. Christ, instructing his disciples as to the manner in which they should behave when brought before kings for his sake, says, "Take no thought what ye shall speak; for in that same hour it shall be given you what ye shall speak." A fanatical adherence to the letter has actually inferred from this passage not the mere needlessness, but the positive sinfulness of all study on the part of a Christian minister: he is to depend upon the inspiration of the moment. But if this be the right method of interpreting our Saviour's words, then let us all put our Bibles on the shelf, and never take them down again. We cannot need Scripture if something equivalent to Scripture be given in the form of personal inspiration whenever it is required. The letter of this passage makes every Christian minister, makes every Christian man, infallible. But surely the spirit of our Lord's words is simply this, that his servants, under the circumstances referred to, ought not to be anxious. The letter says, "Don't think;" the spirit says, "Don't be afraid."

So very strong is the distinction between

the spirit and the letter, that it may often be our duty to transgress this in order to our obeying that. For example, the letter is, "Give to him that asketh thee;" and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." But in many instances we should act not only imprudently but cruelly if we were either to give or to lend. To many persons we evince the greatest kindness by resolutely refusing to do either the one or the other. When Christ gives us these precepts the spirit of his words is obviously this: be as kind to thy neighbour as thou canst. But every one knows that, often, the greatest kindness is to decline compliance with the needy man's request. Thus, in order to our observing the spirit, we may have to transgress the letter. Although our Saviour, inculcating humility, says, referring to his own example, "Ye ought also to wash one another's feet," it would, perhaps, be difficult for pride to find a higher gratification than a literal compliance with this injunction would afford; for pride is never so proud as when showing how very humble it can be. In like manner, there are some men who, if they took the lowest place at a feast, might well be suspected of having done so simply in order that their pride might be gratified by hearing the host say, "Friend, come up higher."

It is well worthy of notice that, in many instances, one passage of Scripture shows us the spirit in contradistinction from the letter of another. There are passages, indeed, which are mutual checks upon the abuse of the letter of each. Thus, compare these: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth;" "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Here the spirit of the latter command checks that extreme secrecy which the letter of the former enjoins, and which would withhold from the world the benefit of a bountiful man's example; and the spirit of the former command checks that ostentatiousness which the letter of the latter might encourage. If from the letter of the precept, "Freely ye have received; freely give," any one infers that a paid ministry is unscriptural, let him remember that He who imposed that restraint upon the cupidity of Christian ministers also imposed this restraint upon the shabbiness of Christian people: "The labourer is worthy of his hire." "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." The extreme Calvinist finds his views confirmed by the former of these clauses: the extreme Arminian derives equal confirmation of his views from the latter. If each were to read his favourite portion in the spirit suggested by the other part of the text, both would perhaps see reason to moderate their opinions. He who, from the fact that Paul speaks of bishops as existing in the church at Philippi, infers the wrongfulness of what is termed "the one man ministry," will do well to remember that in each of the seven churches of Asia there was only one person called the angel of the church. On the other hand, he who would exclude all but one from ministerial work in the church will do well to notice the plurality of bishops in the church at Philippi. We have spoken of the great importance of distinguishing between the letter and the spirit: our readers may be ready to ask how is this distinction to be drawn? Our reply is, that in most instances, and probably in all very important instances, the letter of one passage has its spirit in some other; or, if such other passage cannot be found, the great principles which pervade the word of God will show us in what sense any particular statement, whether of doctrine or of precept, is to be understood.

There are probably few errors, whether of creed or of conduct, for which the letter of some passage of Scripture might not be pleaded; and perhaps the undue strain put upon this text and that has originated and still preserves most of the diversities of opinion which distract the Christian Church. Had all Christ's people attended, we do not say less to the letter, but more to the spirit than they have done, greater unanimity would have existed than we now observe. Were we all to study well the spirit, many of the objections of scepticisms would be answered, many of the strongholds of superstition