A-1

On mistaken Zeal

Acts 26th. Chap. 9th. Verse

I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Apostle in this passage bears testimony against himself, that blended by ignorance, and misled by mistaken zeal, he had been strongly persuaded that many things done by him were right, which he afterwards discovered to be in the highest degree impious, and for which he elsewhere calls himself the greatest of sinners; if then such a person, a man of such natural abilities and acquired knowledge as St. Paul, might err through ignorance or mistake, I presume it cannot offend any man or body of men to suppose that they may do the same, may be extremely positive angry and zealous, and yet may be mistaken: this however I do not premise as designing to make any particular applications, these I shall always leave to my hearers to make for themselves; my intention is no more than to point out some cases, wherein as I apprehend, a mistaken

zeal may be injurious to religion or to civil society. it has come to the turn of all sorts of men to be zealous and they seem to have imagined that all religion and virtue was involved in it, that like charity it could cover the multitude of sins; this notion however my text, and many other passages of Scripture expose the absurdity of, and shew that zeal may be without knowledge, in which case it must be hurtful to the cause of religion, and may be very dangerous to civil society. for fanatics are often zealous for things that are not good in themselves, which error converts their zeal into a very great crime; such was St. Paul's zeal against Christians of which he severely repents, for although his design was good, yet his zeal was ignorant, and therefore could only do mischief; the warmer erroneous zeal is the worse, we must therefore be as sure as the evidence of reason can make us, before we become passionate for any cause, for when once we are governed by passion we may be carried headlong into the most shocking excesses, dishonoring God in the full persuasion that we only know in what true religion consists; we ought to restrain our passions until we are quite certain, trying every thing ourselves, sparing no trouble for information, for every opinion lightly ta=

hen up, and prosecuted with fury, will be imputed as a crime to the zealot, since it might be right or wrong for any thing he knows. further. admitting our zeal to be unquestionably well founded, yet to justify it it must be beneficial in a very high degree; truth no doubt is always desirable, and falsehood always to be detested, but this may be without fury or passion; many things are undoubtedly true, which notwithstanding influence our lives very little, and therefore are hardly worth contending for at all, but surely ought not to set Christian and Neighbors at variance; on the other hand, there are some mistaken opinions of so little importance, that it were better we remaind in them than be driven out of them with violence; History informs us of many deadly feuds, and numbers of lives lost upon questions, that had no concern with the faith or morals of a Christian yet these were called religious wars, and men thought they were honoring God, whilst destroying his creatures about matters of no consequence; this kind of zeal it might appear unnecessary to warn you against, did not experience shew, that men are capable of running into the excesses of hatred and malice upon points by themselves confessed to be of very little importance, a nother odious kind of zeal, censured by our blessed Savior,

is that which distinguished the Scribes and Pharisees; their Hypocrisies affected scrupulous delicacy in their ce-
:remonies; they would not eat with unwashd hands, they punctually paid the trifling tithes, were regular in the hours of worship, and if they did any thing good, they took care to do it publicly, after which they gave themselves up to the worst vices; the weightier parts of the law were lost amidst a multiplicity of forms which diverted the attention of the multitude from essential points, and the exact compliance with which enabled these wretches to pass upon their countrymen for holy and religious persons, by means of which opinion they perpetrated every crime which the mere letter of the law could be constrained in any sort to countenance; this Pharisaical zeal is but too common at this day, but if the Jews who lived under a ceremonial and mu-
:nicipal law, were so obnoxious to our Lords resentment what must become of us who own a spiritual and universal law, if guilty of the same offences. to proceed. there is not a more destructive kind of zeal than that which concerns ceremonies only, whilst the substantial duties of religion and morals are neglected; it may be said that we may be zealous about the externals of religion, without forget-

ting weightier matters, but this never is the case, a natural effect of giving up our minds to things of little importance is, to neglect those of greater, for when frivolous habits are contracted, we hardly can entertain proper sentiments of such things as are of great consequence, and such as let their zeal run riot about trifles, most probably will pursue bad measures to obtain their ends, for a zeal for the essentials of religion cannot consist with any unsettled notions of God or his law, wherefore this kind of zeal will always be directed by true religion; ~~but the~~ ceremonial parts of worship, excepting what are enjoined in Scripture, and therefore are of the substance of religion, being institutions merely human, furious zeal about them shews that there is little true religion in the heart, for if there were it would find men sufficient employment, without pursuing every vagary of a heated brain; if then the understanding is so weak as to mistake shadows for substances, no wonder if they pursue vicious means to attain their ends. the last and most absurd kind of zeal that I shall mention, is emphatically called a zeal for ignorance. if the holy scriptures contain what is necessary to salvation, to withhold them is both a

shocking abuse and gross impiety; this however is ex-
actly the case, and deluges of blood have been shed to pre-
vent the laity from knowing how they might be saved,
without relying absolutely upon the faith of men like
themselves, who not only have it in their power to de-
ceive them, but unquestionably do so; it is painfull
to dwell upon a subject which exhibits such brutal
stupidity on one part, and execrable wickedness on
the other; I shall therefore dismiss it in the humble hope
that the time is not far off when the eyes of all mankind
will be opend to the delusions of priestcraft, and an ar-
rogant Pontiff will be no longer suffered to trample
upon the dearest privileges of Gods creatures. it remains
remains now to be considered, how far our zeal for
the service of God justifies our errors, and mitigates
the evils resulting from them. St. Paul acknowledges
that he persecuted the Christian church, dragged many
christians to prison, and in a word was actuated by
a furious zeal against all the followers of Christ,
in the firm opinion that he was acting an upright fa-
part, and serving God and his country as himself
assures us, but at the same time his consciousness
of the integrity of his intentions does not vindi-
cate him to himself, for if he had persevered in the

same practices, however well justified he might be to his own mind. he is convinced he had been eternally saved, the rectitude of his intention therefore, and the testimony of a good conscience, made no difference as to the thing he had done, for although his intention was good, his actions were wicked notwithstanding. there can be no doubt that the man who does a bad thing whilst in error and believing that it is right, will be easily pardoned if after seeing the mischief he has done he repents and is sorry for it, yet his contrition makes no amends to Society, the mischief remains the same whether he is penitent or not; it is evident therefore that zeal is a dangerous instrument in the hands of all men, the ignorant especially, and the more so because when men are transported with it they will stop at nothing, the most shocking excesses of blind rage and fury, are not only innocent but meritorious, since done in a firm persuasion that they promote the cause of religion and the service of God. when in the days of the darkest ignorance a crazy Hermit ran from kingdom to kingdom, offering entire remission and forgiveness of all manner of sins to such as would take up the cross, that is, would march into the holy land to recover it from the Infidels.

what misery did not this blind and foolish zeal bring
upon Europe and Asia; murders rapes and robberies be-
:came common and ordinary events, countries were in a
manner laid waste, no place was priviledg from this
most dreadfull scourge, untill the eyes of mankind were
opend, and they perceived they had nothing to apprehend
from Infidels, to be at all compard with their suffer-
:ings from the blind rage of ignorant and brutalized
:lots, who were persuaded that they were engagd in
an holy cause, in a cause which sanctified the most
atrocious villanies, which converted robbery and mur-
:der into acts of piety and devotion, which pretended
to send the ruffian who fell in the very act of cutting
a throat immediately to heaven; but will any man
in his senses appeal that this ignorance excused those
crimes; if any man is in doubt, let him consult the
Apostles and our Saviour himself, who foretold to
the Jews that the time would come, when they should
kill men thinking they did God good service, but not-
:withstanding their zeal, they are charged by the Apos-
:tles with nothing less than murder, and therefore
were obnoxious to the punishment due to so great
a crime. but it may be said ignorance is at an
end, the Gospel has dispersed the cloud which obscured
the world some centuries ago, the reformation has

diffused knowledge so plentifully, that no body now is ig-
:norant; this I grant with respect to the duties of life
and therefore if we violate them we cannot plead ig-
:norance; but the points which excite zeal are not of
this kind, they are abstruse points of Divinity, which
require a better education, and longer course of study, than
many can afford, and than the ordinary occupations of
mankind can spare leisure for; I could give some ex-
:amples of much heat and commotion, of much rancor
hatred and malice among fellow christians, occasioned
by things very little understood, and when understood
of very little consequence, but I purposely avoid it.
possibly now it may be thought, that I have attemp-
:ted to lay the consciences of men under too great res-
:traints, to frighten them from doing what they think
right, least it should be found that they were doing
wrong; but this is far from my purpose; my design
is to establish the following simple principles,
first that we should have all the certainty of being in
the right that the nature of the thing will admit of,
before we suffer ourselves to be transported with zeal,
and secondly, that merely being in the right will
not justify heat and passion, unless the matter be
likewise of great importance, such as may reward

our morals, or mislead us from the essential duties of Christianity; when the matter in dispute is a mere point of form, which may be retained or rejected with-out prejudice to religion, to quarrell about it is direct-ly repugnant to the charitable spirit of Christianity, for peace and good will were the favorite objects of our blessed Savior himself. to conclude. our Creator gave us reason that we might distinguish between right and wrong, but least we might err for want of a bet-ter guide, he gave us a better in the Gospel. after so much care to defend us from error, it may be pronoun-ced that most, if not all our errors are of the will, for to be carryd away by passion or prejudice against our better judgment or because we will not walk by the light which God has given us, can have no bet-ter interpretation put upon it. it behooves us therefore, to be constantly on our guard against our passions, and if we find ourselves hurried by them into any act contrary to Christian charity, to be sure that we are sinning. let us listen to Saint James. if ye have bitter zeal and strife in your hearts, glory not and lie not against the truth, this wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly sensual, devilish. for where zeal and strife is there is confusion and every evil work.

Now to God.

1776
Windsor July 7th.
1781
Windsor March 18th.
1787 Do. June 24th.
1791. Do. July 10th.