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Abuses and Uses of the Bible

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WHAT are the abuses and what are the proper uses of the Bible and of this day of the week? This question is of some importance for us to seek to answer aright lest we should fall into the popular error that prevails upon this subject. Mingling as we do in religious society generally, adopting some of its forms and some of its theories, we have need to be upon our guard lest we fall into the superstition and error and before we are aware become bigoted in our opinions and denunciatory in our conduct. We know well that in Christendom generally it is assumed that the Bible is the word of God, while we from the earliest date of our religious society have declared and believe we have been sustained by Scripture testimony in the view that the word of God is a quickening spirit or as beautifully expressed in what are called the apocryphal writings: "Thine incorruptible spirit Oh Lord filleth all things. Therefore chastiseth thou them by a little and little that offend, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have offended, that leaving their wickedness they may return unto thee O Lord." A portion of this blessed, this divine and all pervading spirit of which there is an acknowledgment to a greater or less extent everywhere, is found wherever man is found, darkened to be sure and clouded by very many circumstances. This divine and holy spirit which is a quickening spirit and has even been believed to be by this Society the word of God and the only word of God; that it has been through the operation and inspiring power of this word that the testimony to the truth has been borne in various ages of the world; that this testimony wherever it be found either in Scriptures or out of them is but a corroboration of the word and not the word itself and that

word of God, which is quick and powerful, which showeth the thoughts and intent of the heart, that engrafted word which is able to serve the soul, we find so spoken in the Scriptures, but we no where find the Scriptures called the word of God by themselves. We read of one of the ancient Hebrew writers who after being converted to a purer faith, commended the Scriptures as being able to give knowledge of that which is to come, being able to make wise into salvation; giving knowledge of a purer way, but only through the faith of Jesus Christ. What is this faith of Jesus Christ; not as theologians define it, faith in the Trinity and a vicarious atonement, not faith in a system, a mere scheme of salvation, a plan of redemption? Faith of Jesus Christ is faith in the truth, faith in God and in man. The life that I now live in the flesh, said the Apostle, I live by the faith of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Well what is this other than a faith similar to that which Jesus held, the faith of the Son of God. How many chosen sons of God are there who have not loved their lives unto death, who have given themselves for their brethren even as the Apostle recommended; that as he, Jesus, laid down his life for the brethren so do we also lay down our lives one for another. This then perhaps is the more intelligent reading of these Scriptures and of what is spoken of as the word of God and as the saving faith of the Christian. The great error in Christendom is that the Bible is called the word, that it is taken as a whole, as a volume of plenary inspiration and in this way it has proved one of the strongest pillars to uphold ecclesiastical power and hireling priesthood. What has been the power of this book? Is it not uniformly taken among all the professors to establish their peculiar creeds, their dogmas of faith and their forms of worship, be they ever so superstitious? Is not the Bible sought from beginning to end for its isolated passages wherewith to prove the most absurd dogmas that ever were palmed off upon a credulous people; dogmas doing violence to the divine gift of reason with which man is so beautifully endowed; doing violence to all his feelings, his sense of justice and mercy with which the Most High has seen fit to clothe him? The Bible has been taken to make man from his very birth a poor corrupt sinful creature, and to make his salvation depend upon

the sacrifice of Jesus in order that he should be saved. When his understanding has been imposed on by a Trinity and Atonement in the manner that it has, well may we say that the abuse of the Bible has been a means of strengthening priestcraft, and giving sanction to sectarian ordinances and establishments. We find the religionist, especially those whose greater interest it is to build up sect than to establish truth and righteousness in the earth, and probably many of these in the main idea that by this means they shall do the other more effectually, ready to flee to the Bible for authority for all their mysteries, their nonsensical dogmas, that have been imposed as articles of belief, as essential doctrines of Christianity. But also my friends has there not been an unworthy resort to this volume to prove the rightfulness of war and slavery, and of crushing woman's powers, the assumption of authority over her, and indeed of all the evils under which the earth, humanity has groaned from age to age? You know as well as I do how prone the sectarian has been to flee to the Bible to find authority for war, and indeed in the very existence of war, and there is a disposition because of the undue veneration of these records, to regard our God, even now as a God of battles. We do not duly discriminate between that comparatively dark age, when they set up their shouts of victory for their successes in their wars, whether aggressive or defensive, and the present. There is not sufficient allowance for the state that they were in at that time. Because of the veneration paid to the Bible, we find, even down to the present time, the overruling providence of God is claimed as giving countenance to the most barbarous and horrid wars, that are even in this day, cursing and disgracing the nations of the earth. Slavery, you know how ready the apologists for slavery and these apologists, to the shame of the church be it spoken, have been abundantly found in the pulpit, have screened themselves behind their imaged patriarchal institution and what sanction has been given to this greatest of all oppressions, this most wicked system which the English language furnishes no words wherewith rightly to depict the enormity of its cruelty. And this is done even at the present time by these priests of sect, these monopolizers of the pulpit. These ecclesiastics of our day have sought authority from the Bible and made it the plea

for the sabbath, by quotations there from, that it was of God's sanction, that it was a patriarchal institution. You know as regards sensual indulgence the great obstacles that were thrown in the way of the temperance reformation by the use that was made of the Bible, by authority sought, for indulging in the intoxicating cup. We may rejoice that truth has been found stronger than all these, that thus the great efforts that have been made in our day for peace, for human freedom, for temperance, for moral purity, for the removal of all oppressions and monopolies that are afflicting mankind, have been to a considerable extent successful notwithstanding such obstacles as a popular priesthood, a popular clergy and a popular belief and the use of the Bible, have placed in the way of these great reformations. See now the resort to the Bible to prove the superstitious observances of a day. The manner in which this day is observed is one of the strongholds of priestcraft. It forms one of the pillars which must be broken down and which will be broken down, before an enlightened Christian faith. But then it needs that there should be boldness to declare this faith. It needs there should be faith to act in accordance with this and to declare the abuse that is now made of the Bible, in seeking to establish forms of worship which long since should have passed away. Superstitions, baptism, communion tables and devotions of various kinds and orders, have there found their sanction by improper reference to this volume. Thus by taking the examples of the ancients, even though they may have been comparatively modern, though they may have been disciples of Jesus in his day, yet I believe there is no rightful authority, no Scripture authority, for taking their example as sufficient authority for the continuance of the practice in the present day. We are not thus to use the example or practice of the ancients. It may have been well for them, coming from under the cloud of superstition formerly. They may still have needed their outward school master to bring them to a higher position, a higher sphere, a higher understanding, a higher dispensation, but are we because we find that they continued their type under the law, or their baptism which was of John, because they continued in their Sabbath observances, are we to do these things? I tell you nay. This divine word which we believe to be our

sufficient teacher, draws us away from a dependance upon books, or everything that is outward, and leads us onward and upward in the work of progress toward perfection. Were we to come to the light we should have less need of the ordinance, for it would lead us away from customs of the religious world. If we have come as a babe, like stated in the language of the Apostle, what need he says have we any more of these ordained; touch not, taste not, handle not for all are designed to punish with the using but the substance is of Christ. And if ye come to this then let no man judge you as regards meats and drinks or new moons, or Sabbath days.

Remember the Sabbaths are but a shadow of things to come but the substance is of Christ. Those whose dependance is upon apostolic authority cannot find it, but there is notwithstanding a superstitious veneration put in the clerical explanation of that authority which has led many most mournfully to pin their faith upon ministers sleeves. Therefore we see the religious world gone on satisfying itself with its mysteries, with its nice theories of religion. These they regard as useful but which are really anything but true religion. We see them going out satisfied with their forms and devotions, taking comparatively little interest in the great subject of truth and humanity.

But are those all or the only uses that are made of the Bible and of the first day of the week, for the day has been consecrated to the expounding of these dogmas and the enforcing of useless forms? Are there not also other uses of these, has there not been another reading of the Scriptures? The proper use of them I can verily believe has been understood and is increasingly understood by very many and that the day is a day also for strengthening good feelings, for exciting religious veneration in a profitable way. We can freely admit that the Bible, in the intelligent reading and growing intelligence with which it is pursued with proper discrimination, without taking it as a volume of inspiration but only acknowledging that which is inspired, the truth which is eternal and divine being of value to the soul, had used not a few with a proper appreciation of the day, it also had its uses. How many have found consolation in Scripture testimonials suited to their almost every state? When they were in the low dungeon, then the

Lord delivered his angels and those who are now in a similar state can understand these testimonies and they too sing their song on the banks of deliverance: These find true consolation in these corroborating testimonies for they have passed through similar scenes with those who are now suffering and who are now rejoicing. These are feelings leading to praises and acclamations unto the highest. How many are the testimonies of these Scriptures which suit the state of those who are desirous for truth and righteousness to prevail on the earth, how beautiful is the testimony from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures, to the discriminating servant of the highest that is born to righteousness, truth, uprightness, justice and mercy, peace and universal love? The law of the Lord is declared to be perfect, to be pure, upright and clear, and to abide forever and those who obey this word, are made clear sighted. This truth when heard and suffered to be as a law is as a candle, as a light leading and enlightening the path that leads into the right way. How satisfactory then are the corroborating testimonies of Scripture but not more so than the testimonies of many other servants of God. Why not regard all the testimonies of the good, as Scripture, recorded in every age and in every condition of life? These Scriptures are valuable because they bring together the testimonies of so many ages of the world, but are there not equal testimonies born to the truth that are not bound in this volume? Certainly there are and we do err not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God when we limit the Scriptures, when we limit the truth or indeed when we set so high a value on these Scriptures as to suffer our veneration to lead us to receive truth more from this source than from any other. There is one source which is higher than this, and when we come to it we are drawn away, to some extent from all external dependences, from all outward authorities. And further as regards these Scriptures, intelligently we shall not fasten upon ourselves any form of worship or conversion because those in ancient time were in the practice of them. We shall look at these and make all allowance for the state that they were in and suffer them to pass by. As regards days, we shall not be venerators of days because the ancients were, and indeed I have too often thought that the veneration which professing Christians paid to this day far

exceeds that which was enjoined upon the Jews, among whom the observances were instituted. Well has a modern writer said, that the consecration of the Sabbath or one day in seven, indicates the desecration of the other six, that the consecration of our churches indicates the desecration of our homes, the consecration of a class leads to the desecration of the great mass of the people, the consecration of this leads to the desecration of others, rather than the dedication of them to holiness and sacredness. I knew a woman some years ago who would spend every day in the week reading all the novels that were issued from the press and on the first day she would take her Bible and read a chapter and one of Blair's sermons, then close up the books, and state what she had done, and look with a kind of religious horror upon those who would be engaged pursuing some innocent occupation, and whose every time was consecrated to truth and duty, God and humanity. This latter class find a portion of every day for religious devotion and instructive reading. Oh my Friends, the abuse that there is in this day; leading people to regard with a kind of pious horror anything which is innocent in itself. This is a superstition which we at least ought to be rid of. Our Fathers suffered enough in bearing their testimonies to the equality of days for us not to be found going back to the beggarly elements. Let us hail, in the present state of society, the existence of this day as set apart as a day of rest and it may be too of innocent recreation to the toil worn labourer, while there is a disposition to exact so much of him through the week, leaving little time for rest and innocent recreation, and for religious improvement, on other days. Let us hail this as a season that shall give such time though it may not be so used. Let us also hail it as a day furnishing opportunity for exciting the religious veneration of those who still require this for their better nature, be that either in psalmody, in melody and in prayer or in some other way suited to their views of what belongs to the day.

I also enjoy while I am coming down to my chosen place of gathering, the liberty, the freedom that is manifested in our fellow citizens, going each to his chosen place of worship. I also enjoy the cleanliness of our courts and alleys, and the little children who one day in a week have on what they call

their Sunday clothes and go forth in a feeling of cleanliness and innocent enjoyment. While we feel that there may be these advantages let us earnestly protest against the superstition which had led to penal enactments to enforce the observance of this day. Let us protest against this spirit for it is a spirit of priestcraft. It is the clerical and ecclesiastical power that's gaining the ascendancy in this country so far as it is allowed by the public opinion of the country. It's gaining upon the people and it will make inroads upon us until our liberties are sapped, until we are brought under a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear. Let us then my friends cherish a religion which shall be rational and which shall be reasonable in its observances and in its requirements. Let us keep hold of the faith that is in accordance with reason and with the intelligent dictates of the pure spirit of God. Let us ever hold up the supremacy of this spirit, of this divine guidance, as far above all the leadings of men and the teaching of books or the veneration that is imposed by the observance of these, or by worship in meeting houses. We need to understand the worship that is more in our everyday life that is manifested more by efforts of love and of devotion to truth and righteousness. We need to consecrate ourselves more to God and to humanity and less to forms and ceremonies and to ritual faith. With the proper uses of the day and of the Bible and with the proper use of the church and of our religious institutions we may then be greatly benefited to improved. But there will be division and subdivisions until we come to fully to understand that truth which leadeth unto the liberty; That he that upholdeth truth designs that there should be no inspiration, no power delegated upon one portion of the people over another. Until we come to this, until there is an intelligent testimony born against ecclesiastical usurpations, against hierarchical institutions, against the favored few in the congregation, there must be divisions and subdivision among us. These things must needs be; therefore when we hear of wars, and rumors of wars in our midst let us not be troubled but know full well that the end is not yet, but that we must trust in the growing light and intelligence which is spreading over the human family and which is marking those who are desirous to obtain the right,

who are hungering and thirsting after greater righteousness. That in this growing intelligence, these evils which still cling to sect, will be removed, and one great means of removing these, is the diffusion of knowledge among both male and female. The usurpations of the church and clergy, by which woman has been so debased, so crushed, her powers of mind, her very being brought low, and a low estimate set upon these, are coming to be seen in their true light. But woman must avail herself of the increasing means of intelligence, education and knowledge. She must rise also in a higher sphere of spiritual existence and suffer her moral nature to be developed, her mind to be made right in the sight of God. Then will the time speedily come when the influence of the clergy shall be taken off of woman, when the monopoly of the pulpit shall no more oppress her, when marriage shall not be a means of rendering her noble nature subsidiary to man, when there shall be no assumed authority on the one part nor admitted inferiority or subjection on the other. One of the abuses of the Bible (for Apostolic opinion has been taken and no doubt false opinion, for there have been abundant quotations and some mistranslations in order to make the Apostle say what the priests declare he did say) has been to bind silence upon woman in the churches, fasten upon her that kind of degrading obedience in the marriage relation which has led to countless evils in society and indeed has enervated, and produced for us a feeble race. Oh my friends, these subjects are subjects of religious interest and of vast importance. I would that there were successors coming forth in this great field of reform. The Almighty is calling upon both man and woman to open their mouths and judge righteously, to plead the cause of the poor and needy and many sure are thus emphatically called to lift-up the voice and declare the truth of God and this will give evidence of the divinity of their mission just as Jesus did. The Spirit of the highest is upon me; The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel, because he hath anointed me to bind up the broken-hearted to preach deliverance to the captive, the opening of the prison to them that are bound, and so preach the acceptable ear of the Lord. May they then not be afraid, may they not be ashamed to lift up their voices for the right

so let the sound be heard far and wide and let it go forth to the ends of the earth; The Spirit of the Lord is come upon them and they are called to go forth on this mission. A blessing will be to them for they will acknowledge that the highest has been their mouth and wisdom, their tongue and utterance have been of the Lord that whereas they were a few and feeble but that they have been made strong and mighty in him who is ever with his children. Whoever giveth them mouth and wisdom, tongue, and utterance to speak that which he commandeth, strength and perseverance in accordance with right; preaching and doing that which is right by a blessed example, by a pure life, for this is almost effectual preaching of righteousness.