No.17.
The right & duty of free enquiry.
Gal. 5:1. "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free!"

128 hymn, Ballad P.

Galatians v. 13. "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty."

It is one of the characteristics of liberty that it is recommended to the esteem and confidence of rational beings, that it admits and requires the exercise of the powers of thought as well as the cultivation of pure affections. It does not ask us to believe, but tells us not why we are to believe. It does not task credibility with heavy burdens, but lays reason asleep. Our religion invites examination, solicits discussion, demands sending. When it proclaimed the invitation, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear," it made a demand upon the attention, judgment of his hearers; its assertions are never those of an ambitious head, claims to be trusted on the authority of a given assertion, nor the mere force of feeling, or of liberty.
the sagacity to seize and improve existing prejudices. The writers of the N.T. follow the same track of free and fair discussion. Witness St. Paul, who gave full exercise to the reason of his converts by investigations, sometimes obscure, on the subject of religion. How many of his Epistles are full of close and powerful argumentation, how plainly does he write like a man, who did not expect from those, to whom he addressed, a blind unconditional submission to every thing as if it might be advanced, but who were to use their own judgment, whose judgment was to be enlightened and aided in arriving at its conclusions. Indeed the evidence on which it rested, as a religion communicated from God, the miracles, the prophecies, the internal character, were not such as to enchain the mind by securing the assurance of the passions, or by acting in fear of prejudice, but such as won their way to the heart, through the understanding & the reason. I believe no candid man can read the N.T. without something, as one of the prominent traits of its, the scope

whit gives to freedom of inquiry & the diligence with which it guards religious liberty. The words of the Apostle in my text, though originally referring to the emancipation from the oppressive yoke of the Jewish law, do yet express a noble feature in the character of our religion:

"thy yoke hath been called unto liberty."

Try then, while it makes its power & holy influence on the heart, seize of the mind the free use of its powers & invites it to breathe the invigorating air of liberty. But it is not to be feared that in this respect, as in some other, we are too much inclined to depart from the simplicity that is in it. Even in these bright days of religious knowledge, when

"conscience, happier than in former years, "Omens no superior nor the god she feared, is there not too often on the part of some to claim, or that of others to yield, to an

private judgment, or that cannot be claimed or used with innocence or safety? We are scarcely sensible of the thousand undue influences by which
of conscience is invaded, men are enabled to hold it over God's heritage. The faculty of this operation is much increased by sentiments peculiarly connected with subjects of religious inquiry. On other topics the human mind enjoys completely the empire of its freedom. Has for years been watching in its strengt. With respect to the productions of art, or the efforts of genius, opinion is left unshackled to take those various courses into which it is thrown by different tastes of capacities of judging among men. But when attention is called to discussion of subjects connected with our eternal interests, our best and highest hopes, to controversies about religion, we shrivel back, as if a profane hand were upon the ark of God, or as if the tree of life, while its branches were shaken, would be dislodged off its beauty, if be left to another array in dreary nakedness. This apprehension probably, if not always confessed, is often secretly felt; it springs from a noble and sacred source, from a cautious and trembling reverence for that religion whose the highest.

of our hopes, of our guide to heaven, God may we have cherished such feelings of veneration for so we ought to feel. I would not for a moment compare in importance, the subject of religion with other subjects. I would not compare the gold of Ophir with the stones of the brook. But let our reverence have its proper direction. If we wish to have our powers of influence, it should awaken, encourage, rather than repress, inquiry and discussion, for the more important the object, the more necessary it becomes that we should have freedom of thought, so that our opinions should be judged on the fairest ground and in the clearest light. Besides, we should remember, that the principles of belief must pass the scrutiny of the understanding, before they can properly be consecrated by the sacred emotions of habitual reverence; that our fears are good not when they oppress us, but when they make us do the right. In the task of tracing the embryonic forms of piety as taught in the Bible, we may fairly deduce from what is there taught, we
are to exercise our own powers of judgment; show can we exact this power, if we feel that we are responsible to any but the great head of truth.  

That noble declaration, "The Bible is the religion of Protestants," should be the motto of the religious world. There are many divisions, but they all have much that is good. But parties are not to be sectarian. They are freely and advantageously to select from every source what appears to agree with the standard of truth. Let the light come from whatever quarter, it is ours to welcome it, not to be of that number who, as has been said, "any left, were we not swept in at their casements."  

Free inquiry in religion, then, is unalienable right, a sacred duty, an important privilege.

1. It is so, because it is required by the very nature of these subjects, viz. are to exercise our faith & moral agency. God has given us reason & affections; reason to search & judge, & affections to prompt to action. By these forces we discover principles, by the latter we give them that principle animation & efficacy by convincing them with pure, strong, durable feelings. 

Now truth is the subject of the first class of these forces; - the subject, not of opinion, but of perception, not something to be adopted or rejected at all, like those things which fall with the range of our powers, but something independent of will; consequently, if we grasp it at all, it must be by the aid of some other faculty, that faculty by which we judge, reason, discriminate, by which we discover the truth of principles, or infer their truth, from what we already know & comprehend. This is a matter of some business in which passion & the affections have no share. In the moment the strength of the mind acts on in the straight path of truth, or is lost in the wanderings of error. Truth is like an impregnable fortress which defies assault; or a lofty citadel, which looks down with contempt on the dastardly storms that beat impotently by around its sides. It may be assailed by many and impure interets, or passion; but it
....from on its own base, of reach it all, it must be by that passage and the understanding, free, unbiassed, and others. This is equally applicable to religious truth as to any other; if it be so, we easily infer the necessity of freedom of choice, of the candid, unbiassed exercise of judgment in our attempts to discover what the word of God teaches, and what we are to receive as the oracles of heaven. For if the mind be not left to a free and unbiassed investigation, you must call in the aid of some other means of forming judg- ting opinions, of means, not must be inadequate because they are out of their proper office, because the nature of the subject renders them to be used with effect. If the understand- ing be not defriated of the materials of conviction, it will usually embrace the truth; but you may place the under the influence of false, of love is hatred, or of the other numerous passions which communicate their ever varying hues to our reasonings as well as actions. More than you have no security against the dangers of the extravagance of error. Nor when free inquiry is suppressed or resigned, some of these passions must be summoned to supply its place. If you choose to march under their banners, victory may be your ruin. Among the doctrine valued and maintained by different plans, if you suffer your mind to make its choice under the influence of fear, of flattering promises, of profitable & popular prejudices, you renown the only means wh God has given you for arriving at truth, & put yourself in the leading strings of any one who chooses to dictate your faith. & prescribe the form to your conscience must accommodate itself. But prejudice once secure its hold, & the rest of life will probably be passed in mental darkness & dependence. The stream, wh is disturbed at its origin by torrents or storms, though it pass afterward under a serene sky, will continue to be tainted by the waters of the tempest wh disturbed its source.
very nature of our religion, then, demands of us free investigation. She can scarcely hope to secure correct views of it, who does not keep in sight this prominent feature of the subject.

2. Free inquiry is a duty of a right, because our religious principles have no merit, unless adopted voluntarily, except upon the ground of fair investigation. It is in this case, as in morals, a man may perform actions in themselves virtuous; but knowing a long train of happy consequences, but knowing the evil designs at heart. To serve the most various purposes. If you would not call that man a good man, you would rejoice that he had been surprised into a virtuous action, but you would not call him virtuous. But the same may be at the root of the plant, which grows in beauty and affords salutary fruitage. So it is with the principles of religious belief. If instead of cautious and candid enquiry is a diligent use of all the helps to truth, we lean on the arm of authority, or brood over the woes our tradition has handed down

to age, the more possession of the soundest faith will give no claim to commendation. It will but be a valuable instrument that into our hands without our exertion or against our wish. It may do us good, but it is no praise to us that we have it. He who is a xian by chance, without knowing the grounds of his religion or the reason of his hope, must in the same may have been a collaborator of an idolator; this is equally true of the the various doctrines, which claim the attention & excite the disputes of xians. He, who most cherishes one form of faith & adheres both conscientiously to certain articles of belief, has his birth or education, his hopes & fears, his views & prospects been different, might have welcomed with equal fondness another & fought with equal avidity under the banners of another sect. I do not say it is of no importance to be a xian, or to be of the same faith; even though it be not the result of our own choice or of our own inquiry. No,
the plan of the true believer; though they be so by chance, have inestimable moral advantages over those who are enlightened by revelation or lost in error. Our religion puts into our hands a golden treasure; if we know not how we came into the possession, we shall still find it the source of those unfading ornaments are not of this world. It presents the strong influence of its sublime truths, its heavenly doctrines, its perfect rules, equally to him who does, to him who does not, know the strong holds in which its claims to credit of reception are secured. But after all, there is no merit, strict by speaking, in the mere act of believing, without knowing why we believe. On the other hand, there is much to be praised, not only in the morality, but in the faith of one who embraces religion, or his peculiar opinions in religion, after some reflection, candid enquiry, and sober investigation, for to this may claim the merit of a fair exercise of his mental powers. If then religion, considered as an object of belief, is to brove us acceptance with God; it must be a voluntary thing; a matter of free choice. Is not this truth, or if it be, need I tell you directly, it presses upon us the duty of the necessity of free inquiry? For how can our opinions be voluntary if not formed by ourselves? If how can they be formed by ourselves if we are not left to pursue in an unimpeded course the search for truth? The moment you compel us, by constraint or any undue influence, to adopt whatever sentiments you rob us of all the virtue of our faith, if we become like statues, or may be perfect in sincerity, but are cold and dead. No power on earth has the strength of the right to force us to receive in sincerity or to profess even the true religion; it may make us hypocrites but can never make us believers...

3. Free inquiry is a duty, and a right, because we are accountable for our opinions, as well as our actions. A solemn responsibility lies, of course, upon moral agents for the use of all the means of becoming or doing good, and when they are entrusted.—God has given us nothing in vain.
we are usually willing to confess that God, greatly demands the proper use of the gifts he has bestowed. Now the same gracious Being has given us the power of distinguishing between truth and error; if let me ask you, are you not as accountable for the use of this power as that of any other possession? may we not more so in proportion as truth is better than wealth, as mind is better than matter? Will you justify an intelligent being in the dispute of his intelligence, a reasonable being in the dispute of this reason? Has he been like the brutes that perish, with nothing but animal affections? desires to check the whole of existence upon, the case had been otherwise. But we move in a higher sphere; it is our guilt, as well as our shame, if we do not move in it worthily. We are then accountable for the use of our faculties; by the use of our faculties we form our opinions, we are therefore accountable, to God, I mean, not to man, for our opinions. The management of the mind, no less than of the body, is a subject of moral discipline. We may suffer
to be chained by prejudice, or to run to waste in idleness; or we may mock it, be shamed & strengthened.

5 purified in the atmosphere of truth! — Then we are responsible to God for our opinions, will you not deem free enquiry a sacred & indispensable duty? Will you trust to the authority of men, the prophecies of education, to the suggestions of accident, that they may, you are to answer to your Judge in it? No, you must investigate with fairness; I think with candor; then, even if you should not arrive at truth, you may render up your account with joy, for your secret will be involuntary, therefore pardonable.

Thus my dear Sir, I have endeavored to show that free enquiry in matters of religion is a sacred duty to which we are bound by the nature of our faculties & by the laws of God. It is an unalienable right which we cannot innocently or safely relinquish. — Let it not be objected that to allow this unrestrained freedom would be to endanger the peace of the church of God, to open the flood gates of controversy; & finally, if the same objection might have been made to the reformers who undertook to rescue the minds from the thraldom of formal dogmas, I have been subject to prejudice, where would have been the religious liberty which is now our boast of privilege? You may abuse the right of free inquiry, but what else could God mean, not abuse? For truth; says one, it is compared to a streaming fountain, if the water flow not in a straight path, it may sink into a muddy pool of conformity & tradition. If you seal every month, & brighten danger enquiry, you may, it is true, produce uniformity, but what will it be worth? It will be like the uniformity of courtiers who tremble around a tyrant, & always unite saluting acquiescence, because the dare not question dissent, & swor with unanimous voices, to be sure, yield that tribute of servile will your heart would fain deny, yet dare not. But formal unity is not like the silence of the grave, where there is peace only because all is motionless & mute. It has been well observed...
that the true unity of nations consists not in the unity of opinion in the bond of assentance, nor unity of practice in the bond of hypocrisy, but in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. So long as men have different degrees of knowledge, different capacities of judgment, of different extent of opinions, so long we must have controversies, discussion, variety of opinion. But controversy is a danger from these, while we all look to the great head of the church, acknowledge himself as our Master, sanctify our enquiries with the spirit of common charity. In a fair encounter, truth will certainly gain the victory; when all the minds of controversy are abroad, mistakes not her strength, for she will ride triumphantly over the waves. Subdue the storm and will shatter the vessels of falsehood and error.

No. 1218.
At Holmes St., Feb. 28th, 1819 — forenoon.
- Lexington, June 6th, 1819 — forenoon.
- Salem (East Church), March 12th, 1820 — afternoon.
- At home, Feb. 17th, 1822 — forenoon.
- At Baltimore, Oct. 11th, 1826 — forenoon.