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James B. Finley Letters

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Letter from John McDonald to James B. Finley

John McDonald

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Poplar Ridge, near Lattar, Ross county. 1. Dec^r 25th 1842

My friend James.

I have been thinking of writing to you for some time, but could not think of any subjects which would be interesting to you; and did not like to write a dull prosing letter, about the weather, the crops, or the politics of the day; and I now begin writing without any particular object, only to let you know that I think of you and am as ever your friend.

Theology has been the study and labor of the principle part of your life, and of course I cannot say any thing on that subject which will be new to you, but still I will say something on that important subject. At the request of our mutual friend the Rev Mr. Marley, I have read with care, Mr. Watson's Theological Institutes. He writes in a strong and pleasing style, and supports his opinions in a masterly manner. But his theories are only his opinions. His theory on the three one god was entirely new to me. He contends that the Jehovah of the Hebrews, was not god the father, but a distinct independent god, possessed of the same nature with the father; and the holy ghost is a true and separate Jehovah - that these three Jehovahs acts in concert upon all occasions although they are separate and independent gods. These ideas were entirely new to me. My opinion of the creeds of those christians who call themselves orthodox was something in this wise. That there was but one living and true god. ... that that god had a spirit which pervaded the whole universe, that this spirit was the holy ghost - that this spirit over shadowed the virgin Mary and ~~she conceived a child~~ ^{she conceived} and this child was called the son of god - the christ - or god manifest in the flesh. This is the picture of the Trinity which Saint Matthew, the Apostle Paul, and Doctor Clark held forth, and if I am not mistaken, such is the doctrine which I heard my friend J. B. G. preach. Either of these creeds are sufficiently mysterious and incomprehensible to make sceptics; but Watson's creed of eternal sonship of the Hebrew Jehovah, appears perfectly absurd. Three eternal independent self-existent Jehovahs, would some differ, or else man was not created in the image, nor imbued with one particle of the spirit of his creators.

Scepticism I do not consider a sin, but a misfortune. The word sceptic is frequently used very improperly by theologians, as synonymous with the term infidel. The sceptic doubts - the infidel disbelieves. A very material difference. Who are the sceptics? Evidently they are only found among the enquirers after truth. We are all interested in knowing and believing the truth. The ignorant and unthinking are never sceptics. Enquiry presupposes that we have something to learn, which we do not yet know; but which by investigation we may get learn; for this reason we should investigate cautiously every subject which is presented to obtain our faith. God having created us free agents, we have power over our actions - that is we can cease from doing evil, and learn to do well.

Dear Mr. Marley

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Rev James B. Marley
Near German Town
Lynchburg
Ohio

Jan 20 29 77

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but our faith in all mysterious incomprehensible relations, must be feeble, weak, or sceptical. When I read the Bible its phrasology conveys to my mind very different meaning than it does to many of my friends. Feed the hungry - clothe the naked - visit the distressed orphan and the widow, relieve their necessities in kindness - to love our neighbor as our selves, (and Jesus told us who our neighbor is by his relation of the man who fell among thieves) - or in other words to do to all as you would they should do unto you. This appears to me to be the pulp and marrow of the duties of religion as taught by Jesus and his Apostles. All these things can be done without any miraculous or supernatural intervention of god. It is true that our creation, our lives and all our faculties are the gift of god, but being made free agents, we have only to will and the thing is done. We can cease from lying, stealing, drunkenness &c &c at our pleasure - We can do nothing for god he does not stand in need of our aid: and he only requires us to be kind and charitable - able to each other for ^{the purpose} those we were created, and for neglect of these charitable and social duties we are accountable.

Some who assume to themselves orthodox par excellence, contend that god is a spirit, invisible, without body shape or parts - that his center is every where and circumference no where; ^{that} ^{who} all believe in a material god are Atheists. Such talk appears to me unmeaningargon. The material side of this mooted and inapplicable question appears to me the most rational. I believe that god has ~~some~~ in space a habitation and a home, more affluant and beautiful than we can imagine from whence he views and directs the whole machinery of creation. If this is not true Moses was mistaken when thought he saw his hinder parts. Perhaps ~~that~~ before you read this far you will ^{be} tired of my preaching, I will now leave off.

Mr Hill the gentleman who travels this circuit, so far, is the most popular preacher we have had for many years. His manners and preaching are so humble and sincere, that he receives the approbation of all hearers, whether they are members of the church or not. I am sorry that my want of faith prevents me, from being with him.

My daughters Henrietta, and Mary, are both afflicted with a breast complaint, and severe cough, and have been for about 18 months, ^{and} both I think on the mend. These breast complaints are deceitful diseases, their changes from better to worse are so frequent, that it is difficult to judge correctly of the true situation of patients. . . . The rest of my children ~~are~~ enjoy a reasonable state of health, they ^{are} all your particular friends.

The temperance cause continues to enlist prosolites, many hard cases have abandoned the bottle, and but few who joined the cold water army have become back sliders. The most bitter enemies ^{the} to cause in this region, are some old Methodists. This is strange. We would naturally suppose that as it is so obvious that so many evils follows in the train of intemperance, that every one, ~~he~~ ^{they}

who is a friend to morality and social order, be they infidel, sceptic, or religious, would lend a helping ^{hand} to the overthrow of king alcohol. My ^{wife} desires to be remembered to you and your wife, and rest assured that I am ⁱⁿ every sense your friend.

Except that I am occasionally troubled with a pain in the back, my ~~health~~ is otherwise good. I will be sixty eight years old, the 28th of next month.

John McDonald

Rev J B Finley.

Your old friend Mrs Gore is now lying at death door, she cannot ^{survive} a week longer - She is 76 years old. I suppose you heard that my niece Mary Warthun, wife of Doctor Gary Trimble is gone to the world of spirits, three weeks since. She died in full confidence of a blessed immortality.

My daughter Maria's son J B Finley grows finely, he is a smart little fellow, he joined the temperance society, and talks a good deal about you. All my children and grand children who are old enough to know good from evil, have joined the cold water army, and so have ^{all} my sons in law but one, and even that one ^{grow wiser} has ceased drinking. May we all as we grow older, and better is my most fervent prayer.

J. M. D.

Poplar Ridge, Ross county, Ohio February 21st 1844

To my long tried friend James B Finley

I have long been your debtor in the epistolary line, not from want of respect for you, but for want of a subject on which to write; and do not like to write a letter to you ^{shake} ~~and~~ that would not be worth reading; and even now I take up my pen, without knowing what ^{this} letter will take till I come to the closing sentence. To your kindness and friendship I am much indebted. Had ^{it} not been for ^{your} encouragement and persocations, my name never would have appeared among the scriblers of the day. The ^{sketches} ^{written} which I have written of the prominent actors in first settling this western country, though in a homely and coarse style, will furnish matter for some future historian to place the actions and character of some of ^{the} old pioneers in the proper nich in the temple of fame. I fancy to my self the descendants of the hardy race of men who first settled on the ~~plain~~ banks of the placid Ohio, and hunted the standard of civilization in the howling wilderness, filled with savage beast, and ^{men} more savage than they, will be proud of their lineage, to that enterprising stock of men; who passed through privation, dangers and sufferings so intolerable, that the ^{can} scarcely ^{enter} into the conceptions of the men of the present day.

Our old friend John McCoy, who had the first cabin raised in Chillicothe, died a few days ago; so passeth off to the spirit land the old pioneers, there are now ^{only} a few left to tell the story of their doings. Some of my friends wish me to write an extended notice of his death and character. What ^{he played the} part in the Indian war in Kentucky I know not, he ^{several} ^{times} during the late war. He was a moral and religious man, humble in all pretensions. His character in every particular was free from reproach. I intend going to see his widow shortly to collect information on the subject, and should ^{it appear} ^{to me} ^{be} ^{able} I may write his biography. If I should you will see it in the western Christian Advocate.

The temperance ^{cause} here has stood its ^{ground} triumphantly: very few indeed have violated the pledge. It is amusing to witness the conduct of some of the stubborn ones who opposed this cause, and continue in theory to oppose it, but in practice are real teetotalers. There are more of those who practise temperance, and who have not signed the pledge, than ^{there} are of those who have signed the pledge, and like the dog, have returned ^{to} their vomit again.

When I last ^{seen} ^{you} gave me scolding for not joining the church. I have reasons for my conduct in that matter which is satisfactory to my self. I am a regular attendant in the church: I contribute for its support as much, or probably more than any of its members in the neighborhood: I support their Sunday schools, and every other plan that will ^{have} a tendency to make men better or wiser. I am pleased with class meetings, and love feasts, and rules of the methodists ^{generally}: but still I do not believe in the doctrine of the trinity as held by the church: on that particular subject I am a Unitarian. ^{to me} ~~I believe that~~ When I read prophecies, they do not convey the same meaning, in which they are received in the methodist church. The words are so obscure and abstruse, that no one can tell the meaning until he is told by commentators. The explanations of prophecies has to ^{be} learned out of the book, not in the bible. I am a constant reader of the bible, I read it on account of its antiquity, ^{being} ~~it~~ the old book ^{is} ^{ant} ^{tant}. It gives the manners, customs, and habits of a nation of people, who have occupied ^{of} the attention of the greatest portion of the human race. The bible gives a variety of history which is interesting to the human race. It contains a vast

Exposure

See James B Finley
(this is about)

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amount of biographical narratives, written with taste and candor.

That the writers of these were honest is evidenced by their having recorded the virtues as well as the frailties of their subjects. In the bible we see what slow advances have been made in morals, in the record given by Moses. Noah is described as drunkard - Old Abraham tented out his pretty wife - Lot in a drunken spree, got both his daughters with child - Judah got his sons widows with child: David was a murderer and a whore master. Solomon was no better than he should be - but these men had redeeming virtues. Bad as they were, they probably were the best men of their day. Such characters could not hold a membership in the Methodist church. Moses was both a great political as well as a moral teacher: but still neither his code of laws nor moral, made but little impressions on the Jews - they continued as wicked and vicious as the nations around them. Socrates and Plato's philosophy had more effect in refining the morals of the Greeks - Jesus taught nearly the same doctrine with Plato, except that Jesus taught the certainty of the resurrection of the body, whilst Plato only speculated on the probability of the resurrection of the body. Seneca's moral essays is said to have had a prodigious effect on the Roman people - Fenelon's essays on morals produced considerable effect - Addison and the other authors of the Spectator, made prodigious impressions in the refinement of the morals of Europe. Wesley and our own Franklin, ^{although very different characters} by their virtue and good sense have made powerful impressions on both sides of the salt water. Such men have ^{been} real benefactors to mankind. Alas! to who wish to acquire knowledge, and to practice virtue should ponder over the pages of those immortal mortal teachers.

The fall of man, or commonly called original sin is a very mysterious affair; and ^{must} be only a figurative relation. The snake, the man and the woman eat the apple, they are turned out of the Garden - an Angel with a flaming sword is set to guard the ^{garden} ^{again} the man and the woman should enter the Garden and eat of the tree of life and live forever. ^{to this day no one knows where garden was situated.} Surely this must be an allegory a figurative expression, which may ^{have} been well understood at the time it was written; but ^{in the} tumult of revolutions, the laps of ages, and changes and translations of languages the sense it conveyed when originally written was lost.

The ancients had a great knack of making gods. They made Gods for every purpose, and for all their wants. After the death of a popular hero or saint, they deified him, adored and worshiped him; so that if the gods created man, man paid them back, by creating gods. Does enlightened men of the present day, believe such preposterous fargon? I think not. I am inclined to believe that the Christian ^{religion} will eventually spread and be embraced by all the inhabitants of our globe; without any resort to miracles; but ^{on} account of its good strong common sense in its priniple teachings. "Love your neighbor as your self" - "Do to others as you would others should do unto you" - "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the fatherless and the widow," believe their

distresses in kindness, not upbraiding them with their wants, even if their distresses have been brought upon them by their ^{own} faults - The Apostle James says; "pure and undefiled religion before god and the father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widow, and to keep himself unspotted from the world". Here are ^{no} appeals to supernatural conversions, these appeals are directed to the plain common sense of humanity. These ^{are the} principles which will spread the Christian religion over the world; and the cups of the marvellous is held forth, the faster will be its spread: at least such is the opinion of your humble servant. Enough of preaching.

It is not expected that you will join with ^{me in} all the ideas above advanced, but as I know you to be genuine Republican, you ^{are} willing that every man should think for himself, and speak what he thinks. Mr. Fletcher on one occasion eloquently said - "Why should the narrow heart of man, persecute, with, or without malice those who presume to differ with him in opinion". These words made a deep impression on my mind. I said amen.

My daughter Henrietta has ^{been} troubled much ^{with} a breast complaint for more than two years - My daughter ^{Estie} Gore has son about ⁴ month old she named Charles Lybrand - Maria's son, your name sake, grows finely, and learns fast, he says that ^{he} will be a Methodist preacher. My wife has her health as good as ^{most} women of her age. My own health is good. My children and grand children who ^{are} of age to form characters stand fair before the world, this is a great comfort to me in the evening of life. I have plenty of food and raiment, and small mites to give to the necessitous, I am there with content.

I will now close by wishing ^{you} health, peace, and happiness, and life as long as life ^{may} be ^{desireable}. I remain your sincere friend.

John McDonald

Rev J B Finley.

P.S. Not knowing where you reside, I have at a venture directed this to Zanesville, where I trust you ^{will} receive it. Please write to me soon - When you write make more letters and less crooked marks; for you like the Apostle Paul write some words that is hard ^{to} decipher.

All my relations have partial respect for you.

J M D.