

THOMSON AND THE SCRIPTURES

Many topics of conversation occurred during our passage up the river. The sale of our New Testaments was known to every body, and thus afforded a subject of conversation in which we could all take a part. Of course I had also something to say upon this subject, as it was well known that I was the seller of them. Two copies were on board, one of which had been purchased by the captain of our canoe, and the other by one of the passengers. I have already told you of the evangelical aspect of the streets of Guayaquil, and the same aspect at times was exhibited on board, both of the New Testaments being frequently in use at the same time. During the many things that were said, arising from what was read, (the reading being frequently aloud,) a conversation took place, the relation of which will probably interest you, and more especially as it affords a specimen of the progress of *thinking* upon religious subjects in this country.

The subject was a delicate one, but so much the better, as a specimen. The worship of saints was the matter treated of, though I do not remember what gave rise to it. I stated my views upon the subject, appealing to the Scriptures and to common sense in support of my opinion. A very keen and interesting conversation immediately took place, in which four, besides myself, took a part, and you will be surprised when I tell you that three of the four took my side of the question. The one who was opposed to us happened to be a stout disputant, and thus gave occasion to a thorough discussion of the matter. Among other things brought forward to show the incongruity and sinfulness of the worshipping of saints, I stated that the Apostle Peter himself, (who according to them is the prince of Apostles and saints,) refused this worship, and in proof of this, I referred him to the tenth chapter of the Acts. This passage was turned up and read by one of the company, and it appeared to all of us, except one, conclusive upon the subject.

Our opponent, however, defended himself, by alleging that although Peter, upon that occasion, refused worship, he refused it because he was not glorified, but that after death things were otherwise.—You agree then, I remarked, that worship is not to be given to the saints when upon earth, but it is lawful, you say, to give this worship to them after their death. Let us then go to another passage, I said, and see who of the inhabitants of heaven are to be worshipped. I then referred to the last chapter of the Revelation, namely, "When I had heard and seen, I fell down before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not, for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them who keep the sayings of this book: *Worship God.*" This passage cut off the refuge which our friend had taken in his distinction between worshipping a saint on earth, and a saint in heaven. He then took refuge in *the*

church, alleging that since authority had been given to it by Jesus Christ to order and direct the concerns of his kingdom after his ascension, it was our duty to obey its orders, and one of these orders was, the praying to the saints.

You know, of course, how *I* would have got rid of this objection, that is, by sweeping away this authority of the church altogether, and I stated this to be my opinion. The captain of our canoe, who took a large share in the conversation, and who saw in the church an authority to which he considered himself bound to submit, assailed our opponent by another argument, and a very effectual one. He came close up to him, and with an air of having something in his mind worth saying, "Is it not," said he, "the duty of children to reverence their parents, and to obey them readily and constantly?"—"Certainly it is," replied his friend. Our Captain continued: "And if a parent should tell his child to steal, to lie, and such like things, should the child obey?"—"Certainly not," was the reply. "You are right," says the Captain, "and that is just our case with the church. It is our duty to obey it, as it is our duty to obey our parents, but if our parents or the church bid us do what is obviously wrong, in that case it is our duty to *disobey*."

You see what an excellent argument this was, and it completely silenced the other, and left him without any thing to say upon the subject, except mere general talk and repetition. Our Captain having gained this triumph, turned to one of the four, who seemed rather to acquiesce in the strength of our arguments from the Scripture, than zealously to defend our side, and put this question to him. "Can you tell me," said he, "why the priest reads all the service and prays in Latin, a language of which I do not understand a word, and thus leaving me, when in church, as a mere statue, without knowing what I am saying or doing?" This was a hard question, and it was answered significantly, but without words.

NOTE: The above is an excerpt of a letter to James Haldane. See the entire letter in James Thomson, *Letters on the Moral and Religious State of South America*, (London: James Nisbet, 1827), pp. 181-194.