

Unconscious Enemies of Christianity

by H.W. Everest

The unconscious enemies of Christianity are those who misrepresent the faith, either intentionally or unintentionally, leading to unbelief and opposition to the faith.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, John 14:6, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:3, 2 Timothy 2:15, James 1:22, 1 Peter 3:15, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Apologetics", "Christian Worldview"

Description

H.W. Everest preaches about the challenges Christianity faces from false religions, superstitions, idolatry, and the limitations of science, emphasizing the need for a clear choice between Christianity and nothing. He highlights the slow progress of science in addressing immortal souls and the uncertainties it presents. Everest discusses the intellectual and moral battle Christianity faces against worldly intelligence and skill, urging for a clear presentation of the faith to silence objections. He also addresses the unconscious enemies within the church, such as misrepresentations of Christianity, unreasonable doctrines, denominationalism, and flawed views on conversion, hindering the propagation of true Christianity.

Transcript

IT is Christianity or nothing. All false religions go down before the march of modern civilization. No enlightened man can worship either Isis or Osiris, Jupiter or Woden, Brahma or Vishnu. The world is saved from the superstitions and cruelties of idolatry. Excepting Christianity, there remains only what science may do. But science, whether we consider its adaptation to such a work, or the irreligious bias of its devotees, gives little promise of anything reliable. If soul and body rot together in the grave, there is nothing to be said, and science is dumb; if the soul is immortal, science can not demonstrate it, much less declare the duties we owe to this immortality. Had science any tendencies in this direction, yet would it be inadequate; its progress is slow, retrograde at times, and its results uncertain. Eons would pass away before this coral reef could rise above the ocean of ignorance and superstition; ions more, before it would be habitable by a majority of our race. Just now, God and eternity [109] are declared to be needless hypotheses; or, if realized at all, they are to be classed with the unknowable. Men who have thought their way through this subject will tell you calmly, perhaps sadly, that this one alternative at last confronts them--Christianity or nothing. Said the writer to a skeptical lawyer: "Since you reject Christianity, what other trust have you?" "None, absolutely none!" was the reply. This, at least, is severely logical; for when one has condemned all the evidence for Christ as utterly worthless--history, prophecy, reason, nature and experience--he has thrown down the pillars of all religious faith whatsoever. There is nothing left whereon

nor wherewith to build a new faith. In proportion as other systems disappear in the receding darkness, Christianity rises into the clear light of day. If the war slackens about heathen altars, it is growing fiercer about the cross. Christianity is discussed by the fireside and the wayside. It is the theme of the pulpit, the rostrum and the press. The cross hangs in every sky, and the nations can but gaze. Momentous questions these! Have we light, or is it the midnight of eternal darkness? Is the coffin the only house prepared for the soul, or is there a life beyond? Is it divine forgiveness or everlasting guilt?

The world-wide conflict thus introduced to us is an intellectual and a moral one. It can not be decided by sacrificing the wealth of Christendom, [110] nor by the meeting of infidel and Christian armies. We expect no great discoveries nor decisive experiments. We await no angel's coming to trouble the waters. We ask not for sign and miracle. We sleep, not hoping for dreams and revelations. The prophets are in their sepulchres, and the heavens have received the ascending Christ. On the field we now occupy, and with the weapons now in our hands, we must fight this battle. It is a contest between the intelligence and moral power of the church on the one side, and the intelligence and skill of all the world besides on the other. Shall Christian logicians so work out the problem, and so spread before the world the clear solution, as to satisfy every candid mind and silence every objector? or shall the skeptical world show the most learning, research and dialectic skill, and, though we have the truth, shall they have the victory?

If, turning the pages of history, and surveying the present condition and attitude of the hostile forces, we shall ask how this great intellectual conflict is going, we shall find many things to cheer us. The nominal Christian population of the globe is more than four hundred millions, and these comprise the wealth, the learning and the civilization of the age. There is a high degree of missionary zeal. A large percentage of the world's wealth is devoted to intellectual and moral culture. The Sunday-school movement promises much. As [111] the battle sways from the old ground to the new, the issues become fewer and grander. Religion is less a matter of miracle, and more a subject of law and science. The sword of the inquisitor is sheathed, and national barriers are broken down. False religions and philosophies are waxing old and ready to vanish away. Even the concentration of infidel forces and the boldness of their attacks are auguries of good, for we shall find the enemy and know where to strike. Still, with all these evidences of progress, we cry in our impatience, "How long, O Lord, how long!" Why are so many millions unsaved? Why do so many reject this religion? It is from God, and the evidence most abundant and unanswerable. Why, then, can not all conscientious, thinking men be made to see it?

In answer to this question, it is evident that, while much is owing to non-investigation, and more to that moral grossness which makes men unwilling to believe because unwilling to obey, still by far the most prolific source of unbelief is the misrepresentation of Christianity. This is the northern hive, whence swarm the Goths and Vandals of infidelity. They do not see Christianity as it is, but only some horrid caricature. The light in which they see even this is subject to double refraction, coming as it does through the dense media of false training and moral prejudice. Is the Roman hierarchy the reign of heaven? Is [112] Protestantism, mangled and bleeding, the body of Christ? Is a Calvinistic creed the Bible doctrine of liberty? Does a Methodist camp-meeting present Scriptural examples of conversion to Christi "If this is religion," says the objector, "then I want none of it." We have an example of this reasoning in Draper's "Conflict between Religion and Science." In this work the Roman Catholic Church is "religion," and the better teachings of philosophers, "science." When he has twisted these perversions in opposite directions, of course there is a "conflict." Though this is the old logic of comparing a rough saint with a smooth sinner, yet it illustrates how misrepresentations of Christianity are the chief sources of unbelief.

The unconscious enemies of Christianity are the authors of these perversions. I call them enemies because they are not only corrupting the church, but also giving the unbelieving world its most destructive weapons; and unconscious enemies because they are doing this in entire ignorance of their hostility to religion, but rather with the pious intention of defending and propagating the faith. There were such in the olden time. When Uzzah, in his overzeal, stayed the tottering ark of God, he delayed its triumphant bringing into Jerusalem by twenty years. When Peter would dissuade Jesus from going up to Jerusalem to be condemned and crucified, he was an unconscious enemy of Christ, and heard the rebuke, [113] "Get thee behind me, Satan." In all the progress of the church such enemies have existed, and they are exceedingly numerous and dangerous in modern times. It is a sad fact that one may be dangerous to a cause for the triumph of which he would gladly lay down his life. How frequent and fervent should be the prayer, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults!" It is a sad fact that the great source of unbelief is the innocent enmity of the church. Its divisions; its multitudinous and absurd creeds; its mistaken zeal; its feeble arguments; its monkish seclusion; its persecuting spirit; its unholy, because overdrawn, sanctity; its senseless opposition to reason and science--are but too many proofs of this enmity. Our needle-guns are more dangerous to friends than enemies. Our cannon explode more destructively on this side than our shells on that. Not the gates of Hades, but ourselves, we need to fear. Profoundly convinced of this fact, and believing that every Christian desires to be not only the professed, but also the real, friend of Christ, the following pages are devoted to this discussion of the unconscious enemies of Christianity.

I. The first mention shall be of those who pledge the Bible, as a book, to an unscriptural perfection and comprehensiveness. Let Christian scholars claim constantly for the Bible an unwarranted perfection, and extend its scepter over provinces of thought where it asserts no jurisdiction; [114] and then let the unbeliever show that these claims are unsupported, and that this extension of authority is a usurpation, and the argument is complete. Unconsciously, the Christian vies with the infidel in destroying his own religion. Now, the great body of the church, and not a few prominent writers, are doing work of this kind. On the one hand, they claim that the Bible is all, and in the highest sense, the word of God; that the holy men of old, through whom it was given, were mere automata, and that the volume thus given has been miraculously preserved in all its original purity. They practically claim for it absolute authority, not only in religion, where it is admitted to be supreme, but also in geography, history, chronology, medicine, literature, social law and natural science. It is set forth not only as a book of principles, but also as one of specific commands, intended to regulate, in all ages of the world, the minutest concerns of individual life. On the other hand, it will be shown that the Bible contains the words of men and angels, good and bad, as well as of God; that the writers drew on their own sources of knowledge, had a style of their own, and wrote in harmony with the then state of human knowledge; that the text of Scripture had come down to us borne by the natural currents of literature, and not without many an interpolation and corruption; and that it was given to men of other times and states of [115] civilization and application to this remote age. It will be shown that, as a treatise on geography, history, medicine, government, and many other human sciences, it is a failure.

Nothing could be more disastrous to Christianity than these false notions among the masses--notions destined to be taken away, and with them the Bible itself. The remedy is not to be found in a dogmatic and blind defense of these pseudo claims. Nothing will serve Christianity but the truth. A true position alone can be defended. Our views of inspiration must harmonize with the facts, and not exclude them. We must show that the extension of the Bible beyond the province of religion is an abuse. Admitting the human transmission of the Scriptures, we must show that various readings and interpolations do not touch any essential fact or doctrine. We need maintain only that the Bible "is able to make us wise unto salvation."

We need not barricade the progress of the age with Bibles, unless a sound exegesis shall lay upon us the command.

II. A second class represent Christianity as something wholly apart from reason and science. In many a sermon, reason is denounced as weak, corrupt and presumptuous. Reason and faith are held up in contrast; the one to be condemned and scouted, the other to be trusted and extolled. Everything is to be taken on authority. To ask the reason why is an unpardonable sin. Clergymen [116] are sent to cram their dogmas down our throats, however our moral stomachs may loathe and reject them. Reason must do homage to religious dogmatism. The less reason, the better Christian. The less reasoning in the pulpit, the better preaching. "Reason and Religion" is the subject of any amount of pious and learned nonsense. From the sacred desk and in religious periodicals, science is often the subject of disparagement and ridicule. Much that is false, and some things that are true, are said about the limited vision, the inadequacy, and the hypothetic and shifting nature of science. As in politics and religion, so in science and religion, there is a desire to have them served on separate plates. We tolerate a science of mind and of morals, but what church would hear anything about the science of religion? Here, as before, Christians and unbelievers are working together to build up an argument against religion. It is clear that if Christianity is against reason and science, it is not from God. When the preacher decries reason and science, the infidel says: "So I thought, and so I have been constantly affirming; it is unreasonable, and must go down under the stunning blows of science." These tirades against science are only widening the breach, and causing multitudes of earnest men to turn away in disgust.

Rightly considered, what have reason and science to do with religion? Much every way. [117] The term "reason" is used in three different senses: to denote the intuitive faculty, when it is called "the reason"; to denote the ratiocinative faculty, or that mental activity by which we deduce conclusions from admitted premises; and to designate man's whole mental nature as distinguished from instinct. Now, in whatever sense used, reason is indispensable in religion. Without reason, in the first sense, there could be no conscience, no idea of right and wrong, no perception of obligation to do right, and no condemnation if we do wrong. Without the reason, man would not be a religious being; for conscience must go with us into all religious duties, and we are to seek constantly to have consciences void of offense toward men and toward God. Without reason in the last two senses, religion is equally impossible. How can one incapable of seeing the relation between proposition and proof believe in Christi How could he be held accountable? Reason is the faculty to which God appeals. It is the only avenue through which a revelation can reach us. It must decide whether a professed revelation is really such. And how does the preacher reach the conclusion that reason has little to do with religion, except by delivering a sermon on the subject, except by reasoning about it? But if reason is invalid when employed about religion, then his sermon, or reasoning on the subject, is equally invalid. [118]

It is not the province of reason to manufacture premises. "What can we reason but from what we know" Both nature and revelation furnish us the great facts from which we reason concerning them. Nor can reason reach beyond the premises; it only serves to analyze and bring out what is implied in them. The idea of a revelation, indeed, implies the inability of reason to discover the things revealed. And yet we are not asked to believe anything unreasonable; nor would it be possible if we were. To believe that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead is reasonable, because the proof is conclusive. It would be most unreasonable to reject such evidence. How Jesus performed this miracle we do not understand nor believe, but only the fact. And so, generally, what we believe is always that portion of the matter in hand which we understand. In this respect, religion stands with all other sciences. He who goes beyond reason

is walking in darkness. If we obey the commands of Christ, it is not without reason; we do it because He is divine and infallible. Instead of depreciating reason, would it not be better to urge the unbeliever to a more vigorous and well-directed use of reason? It is not very manly, to say the least, to persuade our opponent to meet us unarmed of reason. Let us rather meet and conquer him with all his armor on.

Science, instead of being the enemy, is a co-worker and servant of religion. We should judge [119] beforehand that these two departments would illuminate each other. They have the same author. All truth is harmonious. Separate systems of truth combine to form the one universe of science. The natural and the supernatural are but halves of the same sphere. Science is the methodical statement of God's thoughts, as embodied in natural forms. If Christianity presents the divine thoughts concerning us, it must be in the highest sense scientific. The crystal, the leaf, and the wing of the insect, are constructed under perfect laws. Science exhausts her technicalities and her formulas in explaining even man's physical nature. Mind is also subject to law. Now, if we find science in all the universe besides, and every force and process guided by immaculate law, how can we suppose that in the higher realm of religion the All-wise works fortuitously and without wisdom? Mental, moral and social science is each closely allied to religion. Religion appeals to the intellect, it purifies the moral nature, it regulates the family, and gives laws to the state; it gives direction and impetus to every measure for the civilization of degraded races of men. Does religion seek to do this in contravention of these sciences, or in harmony with them? If the latter, then, certainly, these sciences will justify and explain the methods and requirements of religion.

Nor does physical science refuse this service. It is occupied in discovering the plans, the [120] thoughts and the methods of the divine Worker. If there be thought in nature, then there is an infinite Thinker. However atheistic scientific men and theories may be, they are piling demonstration mountain high relative to the being and attributes of God. Natural science is removing all presumption against the immortality of the soul. Matter is found to be quite as subtle and unknowable in its essence as spirit. The indestructibility of matter; the conservation of force; the infinitude of beings below, as well as above, man, and their immense variety--are all parts of this argument.

We should welcome every sound argument for Christianity, from whatever source it comes; and certainly there is nothing more natural or more worthy of Christianity than that the works of God should corroborate his word. If the preacher can show that nature coincides with revelation relative to the natural attributes of the Deity; if he can illustrate from history, what the Bible declares, that all have sinned; if he shall show that there underlie the atonement the profoundest principles of government; if he shall point out the adaptation of the gospel to change the heart and life; or if he shall show the reasonableness of the awards annexed to the divine commands--who can object, or upon what grounds? This would not underrate nor weaken other proofs. It is not an admission that the older evidences are inadequate. There are also other reasons for this [121] method of treatment. A large and growing class, who are not skilled in weighing historic proofs, are accustomed to this method. Illustrations drawn from science are generally understood. How greatly it expands the horizon to see that Christianity is in perfect accord with every natural and spiritual law! How it exalts our religion to a companionship with the very stars, to show that He who spoke by prophet and apostle, in the olden time, is the same almighty One who spoke worlds into being and flooded them with life and light. Churches are not ruined by this broad, Christian culture, as some suppose. It is rather those who move in narrow, sectarian grooves, who are mainly bent on teaching how to spell or pronounce the party shibboleth, and who are ever acting the religious demagogue, that ruin the churches. If this be the true relation of science and Christianity, what shall we say of those theological schools which are confined to endless genealogies and disputes about words? Of the two, would it not be

better for the ministerial candidate to seek first a thorough literary and scientific education, and then trust the pressure and opportunities of his profession for Biblical training? or, rather, would it not be best to unite both in a broad and thorough culture of both science and theology?

III. A third class consists of those who pledge the Bible to false science. Here the professed [122] friends of Christianity unite with its avowed enemies to build an adverse argument. Who so competent to interpret the Bible as lifelong theologians? and who so worthy of confidence as men eminent in science? Now, if these shall place the Bible and science in diametric antagonism, how can this result otherwise than disastrously to the church? Doctors of divinity, from their pulpits, may decry science, and vigorously apply the Scriptural epithet of "science falsely so called"; but the great world, swayed as it is by an irreligious bias, will desert the theologians and follow the savants. This antagonism, of course, is wholly chargeable to vicious interpretation, since the word and the works of God are in perfect accord. That human science is progressive, and that this progress implies a continual recasting of present theories, scientific men themselves will freely admit; but it is also true that not a few Christian scholars are persistently and blindly pledging the Bible to false science. This was done in former ages, as witness the efforts to array the Bible against the progress of geography, and the opposition of the Roman Church to the Copernican system of astronomy. "Does not," said they, "the Bible speak of the ends of the earth? Did not the sun stand still in the valley of Ajalon, and the shadow go back on the dial of Ahaz? Does not the sun come forth as a bridegroom from his chamber, and rejoice as a strong man to run a race?" It [123] is not only possible, but quite certain, that this folly is being repeated in this enlightened age.

There is a large class who understand the Bible as maintaining the following theses:

1. The universe is not more than six thousand years old.
2. God spoke the world into existence in a sort of magniloquent Miltonic way.
3. God's days are like man's, and only twenty-four hours long.
4. There was no death in the world till Adam sinned.
5. It did not rain till the time of the flood, and there was no rainbow till then.
6. The Deluge was universal to our globe, and the animal kingdom was collected, crowded into the ark, kept alive, and distributed again, all by miracle.

The design and limits of this paper forbid any discussion of the merits of these questions. This, however, may be said: The believer in the Bible who affirms these propositions enters upon a gratuitous work. He is not compelled to their maintenance. He need not pledge the Bible to doubtful, not to say false, science. The sacred writer does not date that "beginning" when God created the heavens and the earth. How, God made the world, He does not say. Science, without fear of excommunication, may discover this if she can. The word "day," in the first chapter of Genesis, [124] does not of necessity mean twenty-four hours. When it is said this is its plain, literal meaning, we have a bold *petitio principii*. In this chapter and the first of the next, as Professor Dana has shown, Moses uses the word in no less than five different senses. Green, in his excellent Hebrew grammar, shows that this word has great breadth of meaning. The first day, with its long primeval night; the third, when the continents were elevated and the seas formed; the sixth, when man performed so much work and had such varied experiences; and the seventh, lasting till the present time as God's Sabbath relative to this world were evidently long periods. Very probably the other days

were like them. Could the twenty-four hour interpretation be fixed upon the word, what would be gained? Nothing whatever, and much would be lost. Granting the larger meaning, the order of creation, as given by Moses, is corroborated by every science competent to testify. Why sacrifice, without necessity, so powerful an argument for the inspiration of the first utterances of the Bible? The penalty of death was annexed to human sin, and there is no need to interpret this as being more extensive than the crime. Why so construe the Scriptures, and that without necessity, as to call the ancient generations of plants and animals from their graves to testify against them? The account of the Deluge is susceptible of a better construction than that [125] which makes it universal. Why, then, make it more extensive than the race to be destroyed? Why submerge the entire globe to purge the earth of a few tribes in western Asia? for it is not at all probable that the race spread far over the earth till after the dispersion from the plains of Shinar. If the Scriptures themselves give us sea-room, why run into the straits or cling to the rock-bound coast?

Generally, those who dogmatize the most are least entitled to a hearing. The ease and self-assurance with which some preachers declare what the Bible must mean, and their off-hand relegation of scientific theories, facts and authorities to the shades of uncertainty, would be simply ridiculous, if it were not so harmful to the cause of Christianity. It is even more pitiful when men who have spent their whole lives in scientific pursuits, who have narrowed their minds down to the study of some particular monad, or who have nearly gone crazy over protoplasm, shall assume to pronounce on historical evidence and religious doctrines. Such charlatanism brings both science and religion into disrepute.

IV. These who hold unreasonable doctrines and seek to fasten them upon the Bible constitute a fourth class. By unreasonable doctrines is not meant, in this connection, doctrines about which reason says nothing, and which are above reason. Of course, such doctrines can be known only by [126] revelation, and reason has only to say whether the professed revelation is of divine authority or not. This reference is rather to doctrines which are inconsistent with the admitted intuitions and deductions of reason. Infidels endeavor to load down Christianity with the religious wars and persecutions involved in its history; with church quarrels and divisions, and with the weaknesses and immoralities of its advocates. With these infidels many good and great men unite, when to this already crushing burden they add tons of unreasonable and absurd dogmas.

Among illustrative examples, Calvinism is entitled to take the lead. It never saved a soul; for salvation is through faith in Christ and obedience to Him. Myriads have stumbled over it into hell. It is concentrated fatalism. From eternity the unchangeable One elects and reprobates. This election is made sure by a partial atonement, for Christ, according to this doctrine, died only for the effect. To make this fatality doubly fatal, men are totally depraved, and are only capable of doing evil, and that continually. Lest this depravity should, by some mischance, prove ineffectual, Calvinism makes sure that none shall believe and be saved without the "effectual call." Still further, the Almighty's hand is on those who are called, and, however they may wander and resist, they are bound to persevere and be saved. This election was determined by no merit in the [127] saved, nor by any foresight that they would believe in Christ, but solely by the arbitrary will of God. This untrue and degrading view of human nature, this blasphemy against the character of God, this theological system having so much more damnation in it than salvation--these, if any things, are condemned of reason as moral absurdities. The wonder that so many generations should commit the keeping of their souls to such a system is only second to the greater wonder that so many good and learned men can subscribe to a creed which they no longer believe nor preach. And yet there is a true doctrine of election. God, at various times, elected men and nations to carry out His plans, though not to eternal life. He has elected character rather than persons. It is an election through belief of the truth

and sanctification of the Spirit--an election in which the soul itself gives the casting vote. Calvinism is sustained by obscure passages, and far-fetched metaphysical inferences. As a system of human speculations, it is but cobwebs, compared with the universal commands, promises and whosoever-wills of the divine Word.

Equally absurd is that tenet of Arminianism which teaches that a person can not understand and obey the gospel till he has become the subject of miraculous converting power. It makes little difference whether the election and reprobation were an eternity ago, or in this life. In [128] either case the doomed soul has no alternative. In either case God is represented as refusing men the power to believe, and then condemning them for not believing.

Another example is the claim of sanctification, in the sense that one can reach such a state of perfection that he no longer commits sin. If by attending a so-called "Holiness camp-meeting," or by importunate prayer, one could rise to such serene heights, it would be a consummation devoutly to be wished; especially would it be a good thing if some of our public men could graduate in this school before their election to office. That sinlessness is to be approximated by feeling rather than by learning and doing; that this quick and patent method is better than the old-fashioned way; that we can surpass prophets and apostles, or reach such a stage that we shall need no advocate with God--are suppositions sufficiently daring; and we have no need to face the Scripture declaration that "if a man say he has no sin, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

Christian learning and piety have often been employed in giving the sanction of Heaven to systems of immorality and oppression. The blessings of God have been invoked on the cruelest tyrannies. Scripture texts have been patched together by ingenious men to hide the deformities of states and institutions. Intemperance continues its ravages by the sufferance of professed Christians. [129] The church has the power to slay this monster at a single blow. If these unconscious enemies could make Christianity support oppression and crime, this success would be fatal to our religion. The moral purity of Christianity, like the sinlessness of its Founder, is the rock on which it is built. As the sun needs no proof that it hangs in mid-heaven but its own light and heat, so the moral purity of Bible teaching declares its divine origin.

Again, there are whole nations who maintain that Roman Catholicism is Christianity; and it must be admitted that they are sincere in this. In proportion, however, as they shall succeed, will they undermine the religion they profess to love. Men of reading and thought can never believe that any pope, however wise and good, is God's vicegerent, is infallible in the interpretation of the Bible, or immaculate in the management of the church. The nineteenth century can not brook the Romish confessional, which, in its very nature, is an invasion of the sanctity of home. The sale of indulgences, of masses for the dead, and of prayers for souls in purgatory, are but so many means by which the priest may hold his victim over the pit of hell, and threaten to drop him in, unless he pays handsomely. The horrors of the Inquisition, the impurity of its priests, and its grasping after political power, reveal its true character. History, reason and science impeach it of high crimes and misdemeanors. [130]

It is evident that all these advocates of error are enemies of true religion, however unconscious of this enmity and however pious they may be. And it is evident, furthermore, that Christianity must make slow progress while these things stand in its way.

V. Another class of unconscious enemies is composed of some of the most pious and zealous members of the church--those whose ideas of conversion, and methods of promoting it, are not in harmony with

mental and moral science. The prevalent and misnamed orthodox teaching concerning conversion is, undoubtedly, the chief obstacle to the propagation of Christianity. In one view, it is a marvel that all do not accept this religion. Its demands are evidently right, for they are simply that we shall do the best for ourselves and our fellow-men. It enjoins the noblest life. In this world it brings us the peace of God, and, in the world to come, life everlasting. It requires the renunciation of no real enjoyment, of no permanent good. The disappointments and sorrows of this life, our consciousness of guilt, and our fear to tread the lonely pathway of the grave, powerfully dissuade us from the rejection of this, our only hope. Against these pleadings within and without, pride of consistency, fear of man, and the love of sinful pleasure could not prevail. If the earth repels and all the stars attract, how shall we not leave this blighted world and soar to [131] the heavens So it was in the ancient times. Three thousand accepted the first offer of mercy. Two thousand were the result of a second sermon. In less than three centuries the whole civilized world acknowledged the lordship of the Nazarene. Now, after months of preaching, we rejoice over a few scores or hundreds. The vast multitudes remain unmoved. There are various causes for this difference, but among them all the most potent hindrance is this popular, but unreasonable and unscriptural, view of conversion. A charge so grave as this requires careful statement and proof.

First, conversion is presented, not as a moral change to be brought about by moral means, and as something to be done by the moral agent, but as a spiritual change, to be wrought by divine and superhuman power. The teaching from ten thousand pulpits is that faith, repentance, and a consequent change of life, are no part of conversion, but that above and beyond these we must have what is called a "change of heart," or the "new birth." This inward renewal is secured by an act of special mercy, and made known to the recipient by a special and peculiar experience. This experience is the passport into the church, and often the only hope of heaven. Secondly, it is evident that, in order to secure such a conversion, two things must be done. The sinner must be induced to believe in Christ and repent, as necessary conditions; and then the believing penitent [132] must unite with the church in supplication for this divine grace, for this spiritual change. Both God and the sinner must be converted. After the preaching to sinners, there must be the praying to God. The first meeting is for sinners, but the second is for God; and the latter is usually the longest, most earnest and most uncertain. Thirdly, the evidence of this conversion is not the certainty of any divine promise, nor the compliance with any divine commands, but this experience rather. This is a brief, but just, statement of popular teaching and practice. There may be minor differences, but these are the prominent features.

The consequences of this teaching are most injurious. There is no reason to doubt the validity of the professed experience. It can not be clearly defined; and, in fact, no two are alike. One sees a light, and another dreams a dream. Some fall as dead, and others shout till they are hoarse. Mental excitement and anguish of soul prevent all calm observation and judgment; and yet upon this change life and death depend. How much of this experience is owing to joy consequent upon submission to God and to sympathy with the joy of our praying friends, and how much to this spiritual change, none can tell. Belief in its reality is exceedingly fluctuating. It depends on mental states. In times of despondency, when most needed, it vanishes away. A large portion [133] of Christian people have a "standing doubt," where there ought to be the utmost certainty. Besides, if this change is real, why is it not relied upon as a continual miracle in proof of Christianity?

It certainly would be miraculous, and as demonstrative as the raising of the dead. Instead of prophet, apostle or argument, call in a score of witnesses, put them under oath, and let them testify. But this is never done, because Christians themselves have so little confidence in it. The overthrow of such a claim

has a powerful recoil against religion itself. Another result is, that "getting religion" becomes an experiment, and few men like to subject themselves to such experiments, and that in a public manner. It is a trial, and often a failure. Many a penitent suppliant turns away from the anxious-seat a confirmed infidel. Few like to submit to the manipulations and whisperings of a certain class of revivalists and their fanatical helpers. This is all so different from everything else, and all so foreign to their methods of investigation and self-determination, as to prevent even a trial of this way. Further, this view represents God as being most capricious. Now, He loves the world and gives His Son for it. He sends abroad the gospel proclamation, inviting whosoever will to come and live; and yet He is so unwilling to hear and forgive that all this importunity is needed; nay, is often unavailing. [134]

By this view, churches are restricted and greatly hindered in their efforts to evangelize. Revivals are believed to come as special providences. The rain may fall on one country, but not on another. There may be a work of grace at Pittsburgh, but can not be at Cincinnati, unless God comes down the river. Most churches sit, like Elijah on Mt. Carmel, with their heads bowed upon their knees, waiting till some sign shall appear. There is also, on this view, a wonderful misdirection of effort. If churches would reason and plead with sinners as they do with God, they would soon be converted. Not that it is wrong to pray for things God has promised, but we do not truly pray unless we work for the fulfillment of our prayers. This view of conversion leads to the wildest extravagance and fanaticism. Prayers are offered that the Holy Spirit may "just now" touch the hearts of distant friends and convert them; as if these friends would not have been converted long ago, if it depended solely on the divine will. Revivals sweep over society like cyclones from the tropics, leaving only years of religious declension in their path.

The apostles advanced no theory of spiritual influence. They preached not the Holy Spirit, but Christ and Him crucified. They plainly declared the conditions by an honest compliance with which every man might have the divine assurance of pardon. Such preaching now, as then, would [135] commend itself to the reason and conscience of the most gifted and cultivated men, and also be level to the comprehension of the great mass of mankind.

VI. The last class to be considered is composed of those who are devoted to the maintenance of denominationalism. It is no more certain that these are unconscious of hostility to Christianity than that religious parties are injurious to the church; both must be granted. The Saviour established but one kingdom, and He prayed that all His followers might be one as He and the Father were one, that the world might believe that God had sent Him. Nothing would so hasten the day of millennial glory as the organic and spiritual union of all believers in Christ. Those who take the opposite position do so in disregard of the prayer of Christ, the purest aspirations of the church for peace and universal fellowship, the results of union in ancient and modern times, and the deep conviction of nearly the whole Christian world. They are only exercising their ingenuity in defense of a bad case. Denominationalism not only distracts and discourages those who are seeking Christ, but it is also a powerful weapon in the hands of infidels.

Multitudes would abandon sectarianism and this unconscious hostility to Christ, if they could see any way out of the labyrinths of Protestant creeds and parties. This is undoubtedly a most difficult problem. It implies not only the opening [136] of the prison doors and the great iron gate, but also unbinding the prisoners and inducing them to escape. It would be to this age what the Reformation under Luther was to the sixteenth century. Without claiming the solution of this problem, which perhaps is possible only to Divine Providence, a few suggestions only are offered:

1. Those who maintain denominationalism mistake the purpose of the church. It was commissioned to publish the gospel and help men in their struggle against sin. It does not receive men to doubtful disputations and the discussion of endless genealogies. It is not a convention for the adoption of a creed. It is not an Inquisition to try and burn heretics. It is not its province to keep an index expurgatorius of men as well as of books. But it is a home for those who would break off their sins by righteousness. Its sole business is to help those who are ready to perish. How sadly the Christian world has forgotten this! While the day is far spent, and uncounted millions are ready to perish, we are settling dogmas, measuring one another's relative soundness, and arranging the etiquette of worship! A man may be very ignorant, and consequently very unsound, and yet be a child of God. If we must all be "sound" in order to be saved, God have mercy on those who think they are sound.

2. Again, it may help us to consider that all truth is not equally important. There are truths [137] which were all-important to men of ancient times, but which have little to do with us. There are other truths which will be important when we come to them. How evil came into existence is an interesting question, and also whether the soul is conscious or not between death and the resurrection; but they have little to do with the present time. Men are sinners, and it is appointed unto men once to die. The present truth is essential. How shall dying men be saved, is the great practical question. It is an ever-present truth that we should add to our faith courage, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity. If we should erase from our creeds all dead and all unborn truths, they would become wonderfully short and simple. Passing over a thousand questions whose discussion only serves to divide, weaken and delay, let us hasten to the rescue of the shipwrecked multitudes.

3. How far should we hold ourselves responsible for the religious views of other people? Before we set about the task of making all men see alike on every subject, it might be well to ask if this would be pleasing to the Lord. Has any man a right to thrust himself between another man's soul and his God? Is it not the right and the duty of every man to study the Bible for himself, as he must answer for himself before the judgment-seat of Christ? Who would assume the responsibility of another man's soundness in [138] religious matters? Who, even if he had the power, would make all men believe as he does? It is our duty, indeed, to give all the light we can, and also to receive it from whatever source, but, further than this, how can we be responsible? And yet the great object of the struggling sects is the questionable privilege of regulating the beliefs of all others. In their over-self-confidence, they would make all others like themselves. Shall we disfellowship whole parties because they differ from us in matters not essential to salvation? Would such a course make matters better? Would it not be our duty, rather, to mingle with them and afford them light? Besides, our own eyes might be opened. If Baptists have light which Methodists need, and vice versa, how are they to illumine one another in total isolation? Difference of religious views is generally a reason for association, and not for Pharisaic separation.

4. Again, it might be useful to inquire what association with religious people implies an indorsement of their heresies. Do we indorse their errors when we go along the street with them, when we trade with them, when they become business partners, when we read their books, when we hear their preaching, when we pray with them, when we work with them in helping on benevolent enterprises? If any or all of these acts imply an indorsement of all the views of associated persons, then who can be saved? We must needs go out of [139] the world. All this demonstrates that the basis of union must be simple, and composed only of saving truth.

5. Finally, in our search for a plan of union, it would be well to ask if there is a Scriptural, a divine plan. What was the one truth to be believed in ancient times? What degree and kind of union prevailed then, and

how was it secured? Particularly, how were Jews and Gentiles made one in Christ? This divine plan might be worth ten thousand of human invention.

Incomplete as this enumeration of the unconscious enemies of Christianity may be, it suffices to show two things: First, that the greatest hindrance to the progress of Christianity comes from the church itself. Historical criticism, false science and infidel ridicule are nothing compared with this. These unconscious enemies are all the more to be dreaded because they are sincere and pious. Their complete removal requires ages of religious progress. It should lead to prayerful searchings of heart and life, to find and bring into judgment any lurking and unconscious enmity to Christ that may be there. Secondly, it shows the inherent power of Christianity. It can endure the mistakes of its friends as well as the attacks of its enemies. Notwithstanding both, it is marching on from conquering unto conquest. [140]

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