

True Christianity Defended

by John Wesley

This sermon defends true Christianity and exposes the corruption that has crept into the Church, emphasizing the importance of faith and works, and the need for the form and power of godliness.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:21, Ezekiel 33:2

Topics: "Spiritual Integrity", "True Christianity"

Description

John Wesley defends true Christianity by addressing the corruption in both doctrine and practice within the Church, lamenting how the faithful city has become unfaithful. He emphasizes the responsibility of ministers as watchmen to warn the people against false teachings and the importance of adhering to the true gospel of Christ, which is justification by faith alone. Wesley expresses his deep concern for the state of the Church, urging believers to recognize the necessity of genuine holiness and the power of God in their lives. He calls for a return to the foundational truths of Christianity, warning against complacency and the dangers of a mere outward form of godliness without true spiritual power. Ultimately, he seeks to inspire a revival of faithfulness and purity in the Church, appealing to God's grace for restoration.

Transcript

[The following Sermon was found in a mutilated manuscript among ~Mr. Wesley's papers. It is dated June 24, 1741. A Latin copy of the same Discourse has also been discovered. ~Mr. Pawson, with great care, copied the former, and I have supplied the deficiencies out of the latter. On collating both Sermo~ns, I find several variations, and though not of any great importance, yet sufficient, in my judgment, to vindicate the propriety of translating and publishing the Latin one, not merely as a matter of curiosity, but of utility. T~he Sermon, no doubt, was written with the design of being preached before the University of Oxford; but whether it ever were preached there, cannot be determined. A. Clarke.] "How is the faithful city become an harlot!" Isa. 2:21.

1. "Whe~n I bring the sword upon a land, saith the Lord, if the watchman blow the trumpet, and warn the people; then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take away any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand." (Ezek. 33:2-6.)

2. It cannot be doubted, but that word of the Lord is come unto every Minister of Christ also. "So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: Therefore thou shalt hear the word at my

mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die: If thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand."

3. Nor ought any man, therefore, to be accounted our enemy because he telleth us the truth: The doing of which is indeed an instance of love to our neighbour, as well as of obedience to God. Otherwise, few would undertake so thankless a task: For the return they will find, they know already. The Scripture must be fulfilled: "Me the world hateth," saith our Lord, "because I testify of it that the deeds thereof are evil."

4. It is from a full, settled conviction, that I owe this labour of love to my brethren, and to my tender parent, [alma mater: The University of Oxford] by whom I have been nourished for now more than twenty years, and from whom, under God, I have received those advantages of which I trust I shall retain a grateful sense till my spirit returns to God who gave it; it is, I say, from a full conviction that love and gratitude, as well as that dispensation of the gospel wherewith I am entrusted, require it of me, that even I have undertaken to speak on a needful, though unwelcome, subject. I would indeed have wished that some more acceptable person would have done this. But should all hold their peace, the very stones would cry out, "How is the faithful city become an harlot!"

5. How faithful she was once to her Lord, to whom she had been betrothed as a chaste virgin, let not only the writings of her sons, which shall be had in honour throughout all generations, but also the blood of her martyrs, speak; -- a stronger testimony of her faithfulness than could be given by words, even

By all the speeches of the babbling earth.

But how is she now become an harlot! How hath she departed from her Lord! How hath she denied him, and listened to the voice of strangers! both,

I. In respect of doctrine; and,

II. Of practice.

I. In respect of doctrine.

1. It cannot be said that all our writers are setters forth of strange doctrines. There are those who expound the oracles of God by the same Spirit wherewith they were written; and who faithfully cleave to the solid foundation which our Church hath laid agreeable thereto; touching which we have His ~~~word who cannot lie, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." There are those also, (blessed be the Author of every good gift!) who, as wise master-builders, build thereon, not hay or stubble, but gold and precious stones, -- but that ~charity which never faileth.

2. We have likewise cause to give thanks to the Father ~of Lights, for that he hath not left himself without witness; but that there are those who now preach the gospel of peace, the truth as it is in Jesus. But how few are these in comparison of those (_hoi kapEleuontes_) who adulterate the word of God! How little wholesome food have we for our souls, and what abundance of poison! How few are there that, either in writing or preaching, declare the genuine gospel of Christ, in the simplicity and purity wherewith it is set forth in the venerable records of our own Church! And how are we inclosed on every side with those who, neither knowing the doctrines of our Church, nor the Scriptures, nor the power of God, have found out to themselves inventions wherewith they constantly corrupt others also!

3. I speak not now of those (~prO~totokoi tou~ ~~Satana~_) first-born of Satan, the Deists, Arians, or Socinians. These are too infamous among us to do any great service to the cause of their master. But what shall we say of those who are accounted the pillars of our Church, and champions of our faith; who, indeed, betray that Church, and sap the very foundations of the faith we are taught thereby?

4. But how invidious a thing it is to show this! ~Who is sufficient to bear the weight of prejudice which must necessarily follow the very mention of such a charge against men of so established a character? nay, and who have, indeed, in many other respects, done great service to the Church of God? ~Yet must every faithful Minister say, "`God forbid that I should accept any man's person!" I dare not give any m~an flattering tithes, nor spare any that corrupt the Gospel. `In so doing my Maker would soon take me away."

5. Let me, however, be as short as may be upon this head; and I will instance only in two or three men of renown, who have endeavoured to sap the very foundation of our Church, by attacking its fundamental, and, indeed, the fundamental doctrine of all Reformed Churches; viz., justification by faith alone.

One of these, and one of the highest station in our Church, hath written and printed, before his death, several sermons, expressly to prove, that not faith alone, but good works also, are necessary in order to justification. The unpleasing task of quoting particular passages out of them is superseded by the very title of them; which is this: "The Necessity of Regeneration," (which he at large proves to imply holiness both of heart and life,) "in order to Justification." [Tillotson's Sermons, Vol. 1., &C.]

6. It may appear strange to some, that an angel of the Church of God, (as the great Shepherd terms the overseers of it,) and one so highly esteemed both in our own and many other nations, should coolly and calmly thus speak. But O, what is he in comparison of the great Bishop Bull! Who shall be able to stand, if this eminent scholar, Christian, and Prelate, in his youth wrote and published to the world, and in his ripener years defended, the positions that follow ? --

"A man is said (_ex ergOn dikaioutai_~~~)~ to be justified by works; because good works are the condition, according to the divine appointment, established in the gospel covenant, requisite and necessary to a man's justification; that is, to his obtaining remission of sins through Christ." BULLI Harm. Apost., p. 4.

A little after, being about to produce testimonies in proof of this proposition, he says, "The first class of these shall be those who speak of good works in a general sense, as the requisite and necessary condition of justification." Then follow certain texts of Scripture; after which he adds, "Who does not believe that in these scriptures there is an abundance of good works required, which if a man do not perform, he is altogether excluded from the hope of pardon, and remission of sins?" -- Ibid., p. 6.

Having introduced some other things, he adds, "Besides faith, there is no one but may see that repentance is required as necessary to justification. Now, repentance is not one work alone, but is, as it were, a collection of many others: For in its compass the following works are comprehended: -- (1.) Sorrow on account of sin: (~2.) Humiliation under the hand of God: (3.) Hatred to sin: (4.) Confession of sin: (5.) Ardent supplication of the divine mercy: (6.) The love of God: (7.) Ceasing from sin: (8.) Firm purpose of new obedience: (9.) Restitution of ill-gotten goods: (10.) Forgiving our neighbour his transgressions against us: (11.) Works of beneficence, or alms-giving. How much these things avail to procure remission of sins from God is sufficiently evident from Dan. 4:27; where the Prophet gives this wholesome advice to Nebuchadnezzar, who was at that time cleaving to his sins: `Redeem [The Bishop translates _PRQ_ -- peruk, with the Vulgate, redeem, or buy off but the proper and literal meaning is,

break off.~ A.C.] your sins by alms-giving, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor.'" -- Ibid., p. 10.

7. To instance in one point more: All the Liturgy of the Church is full of petitions for that holiness without which, the Scripture everywhere declares, no man shall see the Lord. And these are all summed up in those comprehensive words which we are supposed to be so frequently repeating: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name." It is evident that in the last clause of this petition, all outward holiness is contained: Neither can it be carried to a greater height, or expressed in stronger terms. And those words, "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts," contain the negative branch of inward holiness; the height and depth of which is purity of heart, by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. The remaining words, "that we may perfectly love thee," contain the positive part of holiness; seeing this love, which is the fulfilling of the law, implies the whole mind that was in Christ.

8. But how does the general stream of writers and Preachers (let me be excused the invidious task of instancing in particular persons) agree with this doctrine? Indeed, not at all. Very few can we find who simply and earnestly enforce it. But very many who write and preach as if Christian holiness, or religion, were a purely negative thing; as if; not to curse or swear, not to lie or slander, not to be a drunkard, a thief; or a whoremonger, not to speak or do evil, was religion enough to entitle a man to heaven! How many, if they go something further than this, describe it only as an outward thing; as if it consisted chiefly, if not wholly, in doing good, (as it is called,) and using the means of grace! Or, should they go a little farther still, yet what do they add to this poor account of religion? Why, perhaps, that a man should be orthodox in his opinions, and have a zeal for the constitution in Church and state. And this is all: This is all the religion they can allow, without degenerating into enthusiasm! So true it is, that the faith of a devil, and the life of a Heathen, make up what most men call a good Christian!

9. But why should we seek further witnesses of this? Are there not many present here who are of the same opinion? who believe that a good moral man, and a good Christian, mean the same thing? that a man need not trouble himself any further, if he only practises as much Christianity as was written over the Heathen Emperor's gate, -- "Do as thou wouldst be done unto;" especially if he be not an infidel, or a heretic, but believes all that the Bible and the Church say is true?

10. I would not be understood, as if I despised these things, as if I undervalued right opinions, true morality, or a zealous regard for the constitution we have received from our fathers. Yet what are these things, being alone? What will they profit us in that day? What will it avail to tell the Judge of all) "Lord, I was not as other men were; not unjust, not an adulterer, not a liar, not an immoral man?" Yea, what will it avail, if we have done all good, as well as done no harm, -- if we have given all our goods to feed the poor, -- and have not charity? How shall we then look on those who taught us to sleep on and take our rest, though "the love of the Father was not in us?" or who, teaching us to seek salvation by works, cut us off from receiving that faith freely, whereby alone the love of God could have been shed abroad in our hearts?

To these miserable corrupters of the gospel of Christ, and the poison they have spread abroad, is chiefly owing,

II. Secondly, that general corruption in practice as well as in doctrine. There is hardly to be found (O tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askalon!) either the form of godliness, or the power! So is "the faithful city become an harlot!"

1. With grief of heart I speak it, and not with joy, that scarcely is the form of godliness seen among us. We are all indeed called to be saints, and the very name of Christians means no less. But who has so much as the appearance? Take any one you meet; take a second, a third, a fourth, or the twentieth. Not one of them has even the appearance of a saint, any more than of an angel. Observe his look, his air, his gesture! Does it breathe nothing but God? Does it bespeak a temple of the Holy Ghost? Observe his conversation; not an hour only, but day by day. Can you gather from any outward sign, that God dwelleth in his heart? that this is an everlasting spirit, who is going to God? Would you imagine that the blood of Christ was shed for that soul, and had purchased everlasting salvation for it; and that God was now waiting till that salvation should be wrought out with fear and trembling?

2. Should it be said, "Why, what signifies the form of godliness?" we readily answer, Nothing, if it be alone. But the absence of the form signifies much. It infallibly proves the absence of the power. For though the form may be without the power, yet the power cannot be without the form. Outward religion may be where inward is not; but if there is none without, there can be none within.

3. But it may be said, "We have public prayers both morning and evening in all our Colleges." It is true; and it were to be wished that all the members thereof; more especially the elder, those of note and character, would, by constantly attending them, show how sensible they are of the invaluable privilege. But have all who attend them the form of godliness? Before those solemn addresses to God begin, does the behaviour of all who are present show that they know before whom they stand? What impression appears to be left on their minds when those holy offices are ended? And even during their continuance, can it be reasonably inferred from the tenor of their outward behaviour, that their hearts are earnestly fixed on Him who standeth in the midst of them? I much fear, were a Heathen, who understood not our tongue, to come into one of these our assemblies, he would suspect nothing less than that we were pouring out our hearts before the Majesty of heaven and earth. What then shall we say, (if indeed "God is not mocked,") but, "What a man soweth, that also shall he reap?"

4. "On Sundays, however," say some, "it cannot be denied that we have the form of godliness, having sermons preached both morning and afternoon, over and above the morning and evening Service." But do we keep the rest of the Sabbath~day holy? Is there no needless visiting upon it? no trifling, no impertinence of conversation? Do neither you yourself do any unnecessary work upon it, nor suffer others over whom you have any power, to break the laws of God and man herein? If you do, even in this you have nothing whereof to boast. But herein also you are guilty before God.

5. But if we have the form of godliness on one day in a week, is there not on other days what is quite contrary thereto? Are not the best of our conversing hours spent in foolish talking and jesting, which are not convenient? nay, perhaps, in wanton talking too; such as modest ears could not hear? Are there not many among us found to eat and drink with the drunken? And if so, what marvel is it that our profaneness should also go up into the heavens, and our oaths and curses into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth?

6. And even as to the hours assigned for study, are they generally spent to any better purpose? Not if they are employed in reading (as is too common) plays, novels, or idle tales, which naturally tend to increase our inbred corruption, and heat the furnace of our unholy desires seven times hotter than it was before? How little preferable is the laborious idleness of those who spend day after day in gaming or diversions, vilely casting away that time the value of which they cannot know, till they are passed through it into eternity!

7. Know ye not then so much as this, you that are called moral men, that all idleness is immorality; that there is no grosser dishonesty than sloth; that every voluntary blockhead is a knave? He defrauds his benefactors, his parents, and the world; and robs both God and his own soul. Yet how many of these are among us! How many lazy drones, as if only fruges consumere nati! "born to eat up the produce of the soil." How many whose ignorance is not owing to incapacity, but to mere laziness! How few, (let it not seem immodest that even such a one as I should touch on that tender point,) of the vast number who have it in their power, are truly learned men Not to speak of the other eastern tongues, who is there that can be said to understand Hebrew? Might I not say, or even Greek? A little of Homer or Xenophon we may still remember; but how few can readily read or understand so much as a page of Clemens Alexandrinus, Chrysostom, or Ephrem Syrus? And as to philosophy, (not to mention mathematics, or the abstruser branches of it,) how few do we find who have laid the foundation, -- who are masters even of logic; who thoroughly understand so much as the rules of syllogizing; the very doctrine of the moods and figures! O what is so scarce as learning, save religion!

8. And indeed learning will be seldom found without religion; for temporal views, as experience shows, will very rarely suffice to carry one through the labour required to be a thorough scholar. Can it then be dissembled, that there is too often a defect in those to whom the care of youth is entrusted? Is that solemn direction sufficiently considered, (Statut. p. 7,) "Let the tutor diligently instruct those scholars committed to his care in strict morality; and especially in the first principles of religion, and in the articles of doctrine?"

And do they, to whom this important charge is given, labour diligently to lay this good foundation? to fix true principles of religion in the minds of youth entrusted with them by their lectures? to recommend the practice thereof by the powerful and pleasing influence of their example? to enforce this by frequent private advice, earnestly and strongly inculcated? to observe the progress, and carefully inquire into the behaviour, of every one of them? in a word, to watch over their souls as they that must ~give account?

9. Suffer me, since I have begun to speak upon this head, to go a little farther. Is there sufficient care taken that they should know and keep the statutes which we are all engaged to observe? How then is it that they are so notoriously broken every day? To instance only in a few:

It is appointed, as to divine offices and preaching, "That ALL shall publicly attend: -- Graduates and scholars shall attend punctually, and continue till all be finished with due reverence from the beginning to the end." (P. 1~81.)

It is appointed, "That scholars of every rank shall abstain from all kinds of play where money is contended for; such as cards, dice, and bowls; nor shall they be present at public games of this nature." (P. 157.)

It is appointed, "That all (the sons of noblemen excepted) shall accustom themselves to black or dark-coloured clothing; and that they shall keep at the utmost distance from pomp and extravagance." (P. 157.)

It is appointed, "That scholars of every rank shall abstain from alehouses, inns, taverns, and from every place within the city where wine, or any other kind of liquor, is ordinarily sold." (P.164.)

~10. It will be objected, perhaps, that "these are but little things." Nay, but perjury is not a little thing; nor, consequently, the wilful breach of any rule which we have solemnly sworn to observe. Surely those who speak thus have forgotten those words: "Thou shalt pledge thy faith to observe all the statutes of this University. So help thee God, and the holy Inspired Gospels of Christ!" (P. 229.)

11. But is this oath sufficiently considered by those who take it; or any of those prescribed by public authority? Is not this solemn act of religion, the calling God to record on our souls, commonly treated as a slight thing? in particular by those who swear by the living God, that "neither entreaties nor reward, neither hatred nor friendship, neither hope nor fear, induce them to give a testimony to any unworthy person?" (P. 88;) and by those who swear, "I know this person to be meet and fit in morals and knowledge for that high degree to which he is presented?" (P. 114.)

12. Yet one thing more. We have all testified before God, "that all and every the Articles of our Church, as also the Book of Common Prayer, and the ordaining of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, are agreeable to the word of God." And, in so doing, we have likewise testified, "that both the First and the Second Book of Homilies doth contain godly and wholesome doctrine." But upon what evidence have many of us declared this? Have we not affirmed the thing we know not? If so, however true they may happen to be, we are found false witnesses before God. Have the greater part of us ever used any means to know whether these things are so or not? Have we ever, for one hour, seriously considered the Articles to which we have subscribed? If not, how shamefully do we elude the design of the very compilers, who compiled them "to remove difference of opinion, and to establish unanimity in the true religion!"

~13. Have we half of us read over the Book of Common Prayer, and of ordaining Bishops, Priests, and Deacons? If not, what is it we have so solemnly confirmed? In plain terms, we cannot tell. And as to the two Books of Homilies, it is well if a tenth part of those who have subscribed to them, I will not say, had considered them before they did this, but if they have even read them over to this day! Alas, my brethren! How shall we reconcile these things even to common honesty, to plain heathen morality? So far are those who do them, nay, and perhaps defend them too, from having even the form of Christian godliness!

14. But, waving all these things, where is the power? Who are the living witnesses of this? Who among us (let God witness with our hearts) experimentally knows the force of inward holiness? Who feels in himself the workings of the Spirit of Christ, drawing up his mind to high and heavenly things? Who can witness, -- "The thoughts of my heart God hath cleansed by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit?" Who knoweth that "peace of God which passeth all understanding?" Who is he that "rejoiceth with joy unspeakable and full of glory?" Whose "affections are set on things above, not on things of the earth?" Whose "life is hid with Christ in God?" Who can say, "I am crucified with Christ; yet I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life that I now live in the body, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me?" In whose heart is the "love of God shed abroad, by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him?"

15. Is not almost the very notion of this religion lost? Is there not a gross overflowing ignorance of it? Nay, is it not utterly despised? Is it not wholly set at nought, and trodden under foot? Were any one to witness these things before God, would he not be accounted a madman, an enthusiast? Am not I unto you a barbarian who speak thus? My brethren, my heart bleeds for you. O that you would at length take knowledge, and understand that these are the words of truth and soberness! O that you knew, at least in this your day, the things that make for your peace!

16. I have been a messenger of heavy tidings this day. But the love of Christ constraineth me; and to me it was the less grievous, because for you it was safe. I desire not to accuse the children of my people. Therefore, neither do I speak thus in the ears of them that sit on the wall; but to you I endeavour to speak the truth in love, as a faithful Minister of Jesus Christ. And I can now "call you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God."

17. May the God of all grace, who is longsuffering, of tender mercy, and repenteth him of the evil, fix these things in your hearts, and water the seed he hath sown with the dew of heaven! May he correct whatsoever he seeth amiss in us! May he supply whatsoever is wanting! May he perfect that which is according to his will; and so establish, strengthen, and settle us, that this place may again be a faithful city to her Lord; yea, the praise of the whole earth!

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