

Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity

By John Wesley

Text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor
from www.wordsofwesley.com

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 116 "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Dec 08,2023)

Sermon Number Sermon 116

Sermon Title Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition) Dublin, July 2, 1789.

Sermon Scripture "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" Jer. 8:22

I 1. This question, as here proposed by the Prophet, relates only to a particular people, -- the children of Israel. But I would here consider it in a general sense, with relation to all mankind. I would seriously inquire, Why has Christianity done so little good in the world ? Is it not the balm, the outward means, which the great Physician has given to men, to restore their spiritual health? Why then is it not restored? You say, Because of the deep and universal corruption of human nature. Most true; but here is the very difficulty. Was it not intended, by our all-wise and almighty Creator, to be the remedy for that corruption? A universal remedy, for a universal evil? But it has not answered this intention it never did; it does not answer it at this day. The disease still remains in its full strength: Wickedness of every kind; vice, inward and outward, in all its forms, still overspreads the face of the earth.

2. O Lord God, "righteous art thou! Yet let us plead with thee." How is this? Hast thou forgotten the world thou hast made; which thou hast created for thy own glory? Canst thou despise the work of thy own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Thou hast given medicine to heal our sickness; yet our sickness is not healed. Yet darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the people; yea, Darkness such as devils feel, Issuing from the pit of hell.

3. What a mystery is this, that Christianity should have done so little good in the world! Can any account of this be given? Can any reasons be assigned for it? Does it not seem that one reason it has done so little good is this, -- because it is so little known? Certainly it can do no good where it is not known. But it is not known at this day to the far greater part the inhabitants of the earth. In the last century, our ingenious and laborious countryman, Mr. Brerewood, travelled over great part of the known world on purpose to inquire, so far as was possible, what proportion the Christians bear to the Heathens and Mahometans. And, according to his computation, (probably the most accurate which has yet been made,) I suppose mankind to be divided into thirty parts, nineteen parts of these are still open Heathens, having no more knowledge of Christianity than the beasts that perish. And we may add to these the numerous nations which have been discovered in the present century. Add to these such as profess the Mahometan religion, and utterly scorn Christianity; and twenty-five parts out of thirty of mankind are not so much as nominally Christians. So then five parts of mankind out of six are totally ignorant of Christianity. It is, therefore, no wonder that five in six of mankind, perhaps nine in ten, have no advantage from it.

4. But why is it that so little advantage is derived from it to the Christian world? Are Christians any better than other men? Are they better than Mahometans or Heathens? To say the truth, it is well if they are not worse; worse than either Mahometans or Heathens. In many respects they are abundantly worse; but then they are not properly Christians. The generality of these, though they hear the Christian name, do not know what Christianity is. They no more understand it than they do Greek or Hebrew; therefore they can be no better for it. What do the Christians, so called, of the Eastern Church, dispersed throughout the Turkish dominions, know of genuine Christianity? those of the Morea, of Circassia, Mongrelia, Georgia? Are they not the very dregs of mankind? And have we reason to think that those of the Southern Church, those inhabiting Abyssinia, have any more conception than they, of "worshipping God in spirit and in truth?" Look we nearer home. See the Northern Churches; those that are under the Patriarch of Moscow. How exceedingly little do they know either of outward or inward Christianity! How many thousands, yea, myriads, of those poor savages know

nothing of Christianity but the name! How little more do they know than the heathen Tartars on the one hand, or the heathen Chinese on the other!

5. But is not Christianity well known, at least, to all the inhabitants of the western world? a great part of which is eminently termed Christendom, or the land of Christians. Part of these are still members of the Church of Rome; part are termed Protestants. As to the former, Portuguese, Spaniards Italians, French, Germans, what do the hulk of them know of scriptural Christianity? Having had frequent opportunity of conversing with many of these, both at home and abroad, I am bold to affirm, that they are in general totally ignorant, both as to the theory and practice of Christianity; so that they are "perishing" by thousands "for lack of knowledge," -- for want of knowing the very first principles of Christianity.

6. "But surely this cannot be the case of the Protestants in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland; much less in Denmark and Sweden." Indeed I hope it is not altogether. I am persuaded, there are among them many knowing Christians; but I fear we must not think that one in ten, if one in fifty, is of this number; certainly not, if we may form a judgment of them by those we find in Great Britain and Ireland. Let us see how matters stand at our own door. Do the people of England, in general, (not the highest or the lowest; for these usually know nothing of the matter; but people of the middle rank,) understand Christianity? Do they conceive what it is? Can they give an intelligible account, either of the speculative or practical part of it? What know they of the very first principles of it? -- of the natural and moral attributes of God; of his particular providence; of the redemption of man; of the offices of Christ; of the operations of the Holy Ghost; of justification; of the new birth; of inward and outward sanctification? speak of any of these things to the first ten persons you are in company with; and will you not find nine out of the ten ignorant of the whole affair? And are not most of the inhabitants of the Scotch Highlands full as ignorant as these; yea, and the common people in Ireland? (I mean the Protestants, of whom alone we are now speaking.) Make a fair inquiry, not only in the country cabins, but in the cities of Cork, Waterford, Limerick; yea, in Dublin itself. How few know what Christianity means! How small a

number will you find that have any conception of the analogy of faith! of the connected chain of scripture truths, and their relation to each other, -- namely, the natural corruption of man; justification by faith; the new birth; inward and outward holiness. It must be acknowledged by all competent judges, who converse freely with their neighbours in these kingdoms, that a vast majority of them know no more of these things than they do of Hebrew or Arabic. And what good can Christianity do to these, who are so totally ignorant of it?

7. However, in some parts, both of England and Ireland, scriptural Christianity is well known; especially in London, Bristol, Dublin, and almost all the large and populous cities and towns of both kingdoms. In these, every branch of Christianity is openly and largely declared; and thousands upon thousands continually hear and receive "the truth as it is in Jesus." Why is it then, that even in these parts Christianity has had so little effect? Why are the generality of the people, in all these places, Heathens still? no better than the Heathens of Africa or America, either in their tempers or in their lives? Now, how is this to be accounted for? I conceive, thus: It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive Church, "The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian;" implying, that none could be real Christians, without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, whatever doctrine is preached, where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.

8. To bring the matter closer still. Is not scriptural Christianity preached and generally known among the people commonly called Methodists? Impartial persons allow it is. And have they not Christian discipline too, in all the essential branches of it, regularly and constantly exercised? Let those who think any essential part of it is wanting, point it out, and it shall not be wanting long. Why then are not these altogether Christians, who have both Christian doctrine and Christian discipline? Why is not the spiritual health of the people called Methodists recovered? Why is not all that "mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus?" Why have we not learned of him our very first lesson, to be meek and lowly of heart? to

say with him, in all circumstances of life, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt? I come not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me." Why are not we "crucified to the world, and the world crucified to us;" -- dead to the "desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life?" Why do not all of us live "the life that is hid with Christ in God?" O why do not we, that have all possible helps, "walk as Christ also walked?" Hath he not left us an example that we might tread in his steps? But do we regard either his example or precept? To instance only in one point: Who regards those solemn words, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth?" Of the three rules which are laid down on this head, in the sermon on "The Mammon of Unrighteousness," you may find many that observe the First rule, namely, "Gain all you can." You may find a few that observe the Second, "Save all you can:" But how many have you found that observe the Third rule, "Give all you can?" Have you reason to believe, that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists? And yet nothing can be more plain, than that all who observe the two first rules without the third, will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before.

9. O that God would enable me once more, before I go hence and am no more seen, to lift up my voice like a trumpet to those who gain and save all they can, but do not give all they can! Ye are the men, some of the chief men, who continually grieve the Holy Spirit of God, and in a great measure stop his gracious influence from descending on our assemblies. Many of your brethren, beloved of God, have not food to eat; they have not raiment to put on; they have not a place where to lay their head. And why are they thus distressed? Because you impiously, unjustly, and cruelly detain from them what your Master and theirs lodges in your hands on purpose to supply their wants! See that poor member of Christ, pinched with hunger, shivering with cold, half naked! Meantime you have plenty of this world's goods, -- of meat, drink, and apparel. In the name of God, what are you doing? Do you neither fear God, nor regard man? Why do you not deal your bread to the hungry, and cover the naked with a garment? Have you laid out in your own costly apparel what would have answered both these intentions? Did God command you so to do? Does he commend you for so doing. Did he entrust you with his (not your) goods for this end? And does he now say, "Servant of God, well done?" You well know he does not. This idle expense has no

approbation, either from God, or your own conscience. But you say you can afford it ! O be ashamed to take such miserable nonsense into your mouths! Never more litter such stupid cant; such palpable absurdity! Can any steward afford to be an arrant knave? to waste his Lord's goods? Can any servant afford to lay out his Master's money, any otherwise than his Master appoints him? So far from it, that whoever does this ought to be excluded from a Christian society.

10. "But is it possible to supply all the poor in our society with the necessaries of life?" It was possible once to do this, in a larger society than this. In the first Church at Jerusalem there was not any among them that lacked; but distribution was made to every one according as he had need." And we have full proof that it may be so still. It is so among the people called Quakers. Yea, and among the Moravians, so called. And why should it not be so with us? "Because they are ten times richer than we." Perhaps fifty times: And yet we are able enough, if we were equally willing, to do this. A gentleman (a Methodist) told me some years since, "I shall leave forty thousand pounds among my children." Now, suppose he had left them but twenty thousand, and given the other twenty thousand to God and the poor, would God have said to him, "Thou fool?" And this would have set all the society far above want.

11. But I will not talk of giving to God, or leaving, half your fortune. You might think this to be too high a price for heaven. I will come to lower terms. Are there not a few among you that could give a hundred pounds, perhaps some that could give a thousand, and yet leave your children as much as would help them to work out their own salvation? With two thousand pounds, and not much less, we could supply the present wants of all our poor, and put them in a way of supplying their own wants for the time to come. Now, suppose this could be done, are we clear before God while it is not done? Is not the neglect of it one cause why so many are still sick and weak among you; and that both in soul and in body? that they still grieve the Holy Spirit, by preferring the fashions of the world to the commands of God? And I many times doubt whether we Preachers are not, in some measure, partakers of their sin. I am in doubt whether it is not a kind of partiality. I doubt whether it is not a great sin to keep them in our society. May it not hurt their souls, by encouraging them to persevere in walking contrary to the Bible? And

may it not, in some measure, intercept the salutary influences of the blessed Spirit upon the whole community?

12. I am distressed. I know not what to do. I see what I might have done once. I might have said peremptorily and expressly, "Here I am: I and my Bible. I will not, I dare not, vary from this book, either in great things or small. I have no power to dispense with one jot or tittle what is contained therein. I am determined to be a Bible Christian, not almost, but altogether. Who will meet me on this ground? Join me on this, or not at all." With regard to dress, in particular, I might have been as firm (and I now see it would have been far better) as either the people called Quakers, or the Moravian Brethren: -- I might have said, "This is our manner of dress, which we know is both scriptural and rational. If you join with us, you are to dress as we do; but you need not join us, unless you please." But, alas! the time is now past; and what I can do now, I cannot tell.

13. But to return to the main question. Why has Christianity done so little good, even among us? among the Methodists, -- among them that hear and receive the whole Christian doctrine, and that have Christian discipline added thereto, in the most essential parts of it? Plainly, because we have forgot, or at least not duly attended to, those solemn words of our Lord, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." It was the remark of a holy man, several years ago, "Never was there before a people in the Christian Church, who had so much of the power of God among them, with so little self-denial." Indeed the work of God does go on, and in a surprising manner, notwithstanding this capital defect; but it cannot go on in the same degree as it otherwise would; neither can the word of God have its full effect, unless the hearers of it "deny themselves, and take up their cross daily."

14. It would be easy to show, in how many respects the Methodists, in general, are deplorably wanting in the practice of Christian self-denial; from which, indeed, they have been continually frightened by the silly outcries of the Antinomians. To instance only in one: While we were at Oxford, the rule of every Methodist was, (unless in case of sickness,) to fast every Wednesday and Friday in the year, in imitation of the

Primitive Church; for which they had the highest reverence. Now this practice of the Primitive Church is universally allowed. "Who does not know," says Epiphanius, an ancient writer, "that the fasts of the fourth and sixth days of the week" (Wednesday and Friday) "are observed by the Christians throughout the whole world." So they were by the Methodists for several years; by them all, without any exception; but afterwards, some in London carried this to excess, and fasted so as to impair their health. It was not long before others made this a pretence for not fasting at all. And I fear there are now thousand of Methodists, so called, both in England and Ireland, who, following the same bad example, have entirely left off fasting; who are so far from fasting twice in the week, (as all the stricter Pharisees did,) that they do not fast twice in the month. Yea, are there not some of you who do not fast one day from the beginning of the year to the end? But what excuse can there be for this? I do not say for those that call themselves members of the Church of England; but for any who profess to believe the Scripture to be the word of God. Since, according to this, the man that never fasts is no more in the way to heaven, than the man that never prays.

15. But can any one deny that the members of the Church of Scotland fast constantly; particularly on their sacramental occasions? In some parishes they return only once a year; but in others, suppose in large cities, they occur twice, or even thrice, a year. Now, it is well known there is always a fast-day in the week preceding the administration of the Lord's Supper. But, occasionally looking into a book of accounts in one of their vestries, I observed so much set down for the dinners of the Ministers on the fast-day; and I am informed there is the same article in them all. And is there any doubt but the people fast just as their Ministers do? But what a farce is this! What a miserable burlesque upon a plain Christian duty! O that the General Assembly would have regard to the honour of their nation! Let them roll away from it this shameful reproach, by either enforcing the duty, or removing that article from their books. Let it never appear there any more! Let it vanish away for ever

16. But why is self-denial in general so little practised at present among the Methodists? Why is so exceedingly little of it to be found even in the oldest and largest societies? The more I observe and consider things,

the more clearly it appears what is the cause of this in London, in Bristol, in Birmingham, in Manchester, in Leeds, in Dublin, in Cork. The Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they grow rich. Although many of them are still deplorably poor; ("tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets of Askelon!") yet many others, in the space of twenty, thirty, or forty years, are twenty, thirty, yea, a hundred times richer than they were when they first entered the society. And it is an observation which admits of few exceptions, that nine in ten of these decreased in grace, in the same proportion as they increased in wealth. Indeed, according to the natural tendency of riches, we cannot expect it to be otherwise.

17. But how astonishing a thing is this! How can we understand it? Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be) that Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency, in process of time, to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches! and riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity. Now, if there be no way to prevent this, Christianity is inconsistent with itself, and, of consequence, cannot stand, cannot continue long among any people; since, wherever it generally prevails, it saps its own foundation.

18. But is there no way to prevent this? -- to continue Christianity among a people? Allowing that diligence and frugality must produce riches, is there no means to hinder riches from destroying the religion of those that possess them? I can see only one possible way; find out another who can. Do you gain all you can, and save all you can? Then you must, in the nature of things, grow rich. Then if you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, give all you can; otherwise I can have no more hope of your salvation, than of that of Judas Iscariot.

19. I call God to record upon my soul, that I advise no more than I practise. I do, blessed be God, gain, and save, and give all I can. And so, I trust in God, I shall do, while the breath of God is in my nostrils. But what then? I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus my Lord! Still, I give up every plea beside, -- Lord, I am damn'd! but thou hast died!

Copyright © 2011-2014 WordsOfWesley.com. All rights reserved.

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 116 "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Dec 08,2023)