

INADEQUATE
CONCEPTIONS OF THE
IMPORTANCE OF
CHRISTIANITY



It is proper at this time to point out the very inadequate conception that professing Christians entertain of the importance, nature, and superior excellence of Christianity. If we listen to their conversation, virtue is praised, and vice is censured. Piety is perhaps applauded and profanity condemned.

So far all is well. But let anyone who is not deceived by these barren generalities examine these Christians' profession a little closer. He will find they do not pay homage to Christianity in particular. At best they pay homage to religion in general—perhaps to mere morality.

With Christianity, professing Christians are little acquainted. Their views of Christianity have been so cursory and superficial that they have little more than perceived those exterior circumstances that distinguish it from other forms of religion. These circumstances are some few facts, and perhaps some leading doctrines and principles, of which they cannot be wholly ignorant. But of the consequences, relations, and practical uses of these principles, they have few ideas—or none at all.

Does the language seem too strong in speaking of professing

Christians? View their plan of life and their ordinary conduct. Wherein can we discern the points of difference between them and acknowledged unbelievers? In an age in which infidelity abounds, do we observe them carefully instructing their children in the principles of faith that they profess? Or do they furnish their children with arguments for the defense of that faith?

They would blush on their child's birth to think him inadequate in any branch of knowledge or any skill pertaining to his station in life. He cultivates these skills with becoming diligence. But he is left to collect his religion as he may. The study of Christianity has formed no part of his education. His attachment to it—where any attachment to it exists at all—is too often not the preference of sober reason and conviction. Instead his attachment to Christianity is merely the result of early and groundless prepossession. He was born in a Christian country, so of course he is a Christian. His father was a member of the Church of England, so that is why he is, too.

When religion is handed down among us by hereditary succession, it is not surprising to find youth of sense and spirit beginning to question the truth of the system in which they were brought up. And it is not surprising to see them abandon a position that they are unable to defend. Knowing Christianity chiefly by its difficulties and the impossibilities falsely imputed to it, they fall perhaps into the company of unbelievers.

Let us therefore beware before it is too late. Let us beware that, in schools and colleges, Christianity is almost—if not altogether—neglected. We cannot expect those who pay so little regard to this great object of education of their children to be more attentive to it in other parts of their children's conduct. If they have little regard for the state of Christianity, they will be still more indifferent about communicating the light of divine truth to the nations that "still sit in darkness."

But religion, one may reply, is not noisy and ostentatious. It is modest and private in its nature. It resides in a man's bosom and shuns the observation of the multitude. Be it so.

From our transient and distant view of these unassuming Christians, let us approach a little nearer and listen to the unreserved conversation of their confidential hours. Here, if anywhere, one sees the interior of the heart laid open. And we may ascertain the true principles of their affections and aversions, the scale by which they measure the good and the evil of life.

Here, however, you will discover few or no traces of Christianity. It scarcely finds a place amid the many objects of their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows. They are grateful perhaps, as well indeed they may be grateful for health and talents, affluence, and other temporal possessions. Yet they scarcely reckon this grand distinguishing mark of the bounty of God's providence among their many blessings. Or if they mention Christianity at all, they notice it coldly and formally. We could liken this act of mentioning to one of the obsolete claims to which family decorum or national usage have accustomed us.

What if their religious conversation is more serious? Here we must expect their religion, modest and shy as we are now presuming it to be, to disclose itself at length. Here, however, you will look in vain for the religion of Jesus.

Their standard of right and wrong is not the standard of the Gospel. They approve and condemn by a different rule. They advance principles and maintain opinions altogether opposite to the genius and character of Christianity. If we would know the truth, their opinions on the subject of religion are not formed from the perusal of the Word of God. The Bible lies on a shelf unopened. And they would be wholly ignorant of its contents, except for what they hear occasionally in church. Or

perhaps they retain vague traces of the truth in their memories from the lessons of childhood.

How different, then, and indeed how contradictory are these two systems. One forms itself out of the commonly received maxims of Christendom, and the other forms itself from the study of the Holy Scriptures! It would be curious to observe (in anyone who had hitherto satisfied himself with the first system) the astonishment a person would show on his first introduction to the system based on Scripture!

How criminal, then, must this voluntary ignorance of Christianity and the Word of God appear in the sight of God. When God of His goodness has granted us such abundant means of instruction, how great must be the guilt, and how awful must be the punishment, of voluntary ignorance!

And why are we to expect knowledge without inquiry and success without endeavor? Bountiful as is the hand of Providence, it does not bestow its gifts to seduce us into laziness. It bestows gifts to arouse us to exertion. No one expects to attain to the heights of learning, or arts, or power, or wealth, or military glory without vigorous resolution, strenuous diligence, and steady perseverance.

Yet we expect to be Christians without labor, study, or inquiry! This is the more preposterous because Christianity, a revelation from God and not an invention of man, shows us new relations with their correspondent duties. It contains also doctrines, motives, and precepts peculiar to itself. We cannot reasonably expect to become proficient accidentally, as one might learn insensibly the maxims of worldly policy or a scheme of mere morals.

The diligent perusal of the Holy Scriptures would show us our past ignorances. We would cease being deceived by superficial appearances and confounding the Gospel of Christ with

the systems of philosophers. The weighty truth forgotten today that Christianity calls on us to believe the doctrines, imbibe the principles, and practice the precepts of Christ would impress us.

Scripture everywhere represents the Gospel by figures strongly calculated to impress on our minds a sense of its value. It speaks of the Gospel as light from darkness, as release from prison, as deliverance from captivity, as life from death. The early converts universally received it with thankfulness and joy. At one time, the communication of it is promised as a reward. At another, the loss of it is threatened as a punishment. And the more general extension of the kingdom of Christ constitutes one of the leading petitions of the short prayer taught by our blessed Savior.

What exalted conceptions of the importance of Christianity ought to fill us when we read these descriptions. Yet in vain have we "line upon line and precept upon precept" (Isaiah 28:10). Though the Gospel had been predicted, prayed and longed for, announced, characterized and rejoiced in, we scarcely accept this heavenly treasure even when it is poured in our lap in rich abundance. We turn from it coldly or, at best, possess it negligently as a thing of no estimation.

But we would be impressed with a sense of the value of Christianity by the diligent study of the Word of God, that blessed storehouse of heavenly truth and consolation. In the Word we learn what we ought to believe and what to practice. Reason dictates. Revelation commands.

"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). "Search the Scriptures" (John 5:39). "Be ready to give every one a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Such are the declarations and injunctions of the inspired

writers. The commendations of those who obey the admonition confirm these injunctions. Yet is it not undeniable that with the Bible in our houses, we are ignorant of its contents? In a great measure, the bulk of the Christian world knows so little, and mistakes so greatly, the foundational principles of the religion that it professes!

At this point I will not inquire as to why those who assent to the position that the Bible is the Word of God, and who profess to rest their hopes on the Christian basis, contentedly acquiesce in a state of such lamentable ignorance. This acquiescence, however, appears to derive much secret support from two kindred opinions. One is that *it signifies little what a man believes; look to his practice*. The other (of the same family) is that *sincerity is all in all*. Let a man's opinion and conduct be what they may, provided he be sincerely convinced that they are right. Whatever way the demands of civil society require him to be dealt with among men, in the sight of God he cannot be criminal.

It would take too long to set forth the various evils inherent in these popular views. It is obvious they have limitless application. The first of these maxims proceeds from the monstrous supposition that although we are accountable creatures, we shall not be called upon to account before God for the exercise of our intellectual and emotional powers. Moreover, it proceeds on that grossly fallacious assumption that a man's opinions will not influence his practice.

We need to remind the advocates of this fallacious principle that one's judgment often receives a corrupt bias from the heart and the affections. Vice is the fruitful mother of prejudice and error.

Forgetful of these truths and confusing the most important moral distinctions, they place on the same level two groups of people. The first group is composed of those who carefully

weed from their hearts every false principle and occupy themselves in a sincere and warm pursuit of truth. The second group is composed of those who yield themselves implicitly to the opinions—whatever they may be—that early prepossession may have infused. It is also composed of those who yield to whatever passion, or interest, or even acquiescing lazy spirit may have been imposed upon their minds.

The second of the foregoing maxims, that sincerity is all in all, proceeds on this groundless supposition: The Supreme Being has not afforded us sufficient means of discriminating truth from falsehood or right from wrong. It implies that it does not matter how wild or extravagant a man's opinions or conduct may be. They are as much the result of impartial inquiry and honest conviction as if his sentiments and actions had been strictly conformable to the rules of reason and sobriety.

Never indeed was there a principle more general in its use, more sovereign in its potency. Instances can be found in secular history of persons committing the greatest crimes with a sincere conviction of the integrity of their conduct. Scripture offers us parallels.

It was to guard us against the error we have now been exposing that our blessed Savior forewarned His disciples: "The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 16:2).

We must abandon any principle like this. We must compel advocates of sincerity to restore this term to its genuine significance. They must acknowledge that it implies honesty of mind, a faithful use of the means of knowledge and improvement, a desire of being instructed, humble inquiry, impartial consideration, and unprejudiced judgment.

To these values we are earnestly called, accompanied with fervent prayer for the divine blessing. "Ask, and you shall

receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come you to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1).

Such are the comfortable assurances and gracious encouragements held out to the truly sincere inquirer. How deep will be our guilt if we slight all these benevolent offers! "How many prophets and kings have desired to hear the things that we hear, and have not heard them!" (Luke 10:24).

Great indeed are our opportunities. Great also is our responsibility. The time of reckoning will at length arrive. And when finally summoned to the bar of God to give an account of our stewardship, what plea can we have to urge in our defense? What will be our defense if we remain willingly and obstinately ignorant of the way that leads to life? What can be our defense when we have such transcendent means of knowing this way to life and such urgent motives to its pursuit?