

Christian Evidences and Modern Infidelity

A Sermon Preached in St Mark's Church, Dalston
At the Request of the Christian Evidence Society
On Sunday Morning, November 16, 1884,
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[Spelling and punctuation adjusted. Bible citations converted to all Arabic numerals.
Footnotes moved into or near their places of citation.]

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” – 1 Peter 3:15.

These Letters of St. Peter were written, as their title indicates, to those Christians, many of them Hebrew Christians of the Dispersion, who were scattered abroad, on account of persecution, through the greater part of the civilized world. Hence these special instructions for their guidance in their conduct towards those who opposed them.

Their first great duty was “to sanctify the Lord God in their hearts”; or, as the words should be read, according to the best authorities, “to sanctify in their hearts Christ as Lord”; and being filled with this holy fear, they were to be ready always to give answer to every man who might ask them a reason concerning the hope that was in them, yet with meekness and fear. It is said of Martin Luther, when contemplating this passage, and with the full experience of the rough handling which he had met with at Worms and elsewhere, that he thus applied the words: “Ye must not answer with proud language, and bring out the matter with defiance and violence, but with such fear and lowliness as if ye stood before God’s tribunal. So must thou stand in fear, and not rest upon thine own strength, but upon the word and promise of Christ.”

Well, brethren, we are not exposed to the fire of persecution as these Christians were; but it is no less important that we too should be able, when asked, to give a reason for the hope that is in us. For it cannot be denied that Christianity suffers much from the fact that its possessors are not able, as they ought to be, to give the reasons for their belief, and to justify it to the world. No doubt, the best evidence that we can offer of the reality of the hope that is in us is the influence which it has upon our hearts and lives.

Still, we must not rest contented with this. We know that it was a charge frequently brought both by heathens and by early heretics against Christians, that they were not able to produce any rational arguments in defense of the truth of their religion. That charge was indeed sufficiently refuted by the Christian apologists of the second and third centuries. But what was needful then is just as needful now. Infidelity is continually assuming new forms, adapted to the different habits of thought of different ages, and requires different modes of treatment. Only it should be borne in mind that St. Peter's injunction in my text is never out of place. It does not, however, imply that the Christian should be able or willing to deal with captious or sophistical reasoning; but that he should be always ready to show that he does not hope without reason, or believe without proofs which have satisfied his judgment and his conscience.

Now, there are two distinct kinds of evidence by which the truth of Christianity may be vindicated, namely, *probable* evidence and *positive* evidence. I assume at once the existence of God. The truth that God exists must be the foundation of all religion; and the consent of all nations on this point may be accepted as a law of nature. Such a belief must have proceeded from an observation of the structure of the world without us, and of the constitution of our own nature within us. The Universe could not have created itself; and so neither could it have come into being by chance. We see on every side of us the evidences of design in the things that are made, from the least to the greatest; and the operation of chance is inconsistent with that of design. One of the most profound thinkers of ancient times – I mean Aristotle – says on this point, That one or two things should happen in the same manner, it is reasonable to suppose; but that the whole frame of the Universe, with its harmony and symmetry, should have come into being by chance, it seems impossible to conceive." [Aristotle, "De Coelo," ii. 8.]

But not only does the constitution of the world around us teach us this primary truth that there is a God; so also does the constitution of our own nature lead us to this conclusion. The wisest and greatest of men in all ages, by reflecting upon themselves, and observing in themselves whatever is most good and excellent, have adopted notions concerning God very much in accordance with what we are taught by Revelation. There are passages in Socrates, in Plato, in Aristotle, in Cicero, which indicate how near an affinity there is between us and God, and what evident characters of Deity

are impressed upon us, fully justifying the assertions of the heathen poet, "We are also His offspring," [Aratus, of Cilicia ; quoted by St. Paul, Acts 17:28.] and showing us how easily we may know something of Him if we are not altogether ignorant of ourselves; so that our own consciences, if we will listen to that voice within us, will supply us with arguments to prove that He is, and to teach us in some sort what He is. But we must feel after Him if we would find Him by the saving of the soul. He hides Himself from those who refuse to recognize Him; and who, when driven from their stronghold of infidelity, as they are remarkably in this day by the discoveries of Science, which are ever in harmony with Revelation, take refuge in Agnosticism, which is nothing more than a veiled Atheism – a convenient mode of dismissing a truth which they cannot deny, and will not accept.

Assuming, then, that there is a God, it is only natural to suppose that He would communicate His will to His reasonable creatures, formed in His own image, when and as He pleases. To question this would be to limit His power, and to deny to Him the essential attributes of Deity.

Well, here we have in our hands a Book professing to contain a revelation from God to man. Now, what does the Bible teach us? It confirms and emphasizes all that natural religion teaches us. It tells us of our noble origin, as formed in the image of God. It tells us of our fall in Adam. It reveals to us a wonderful method for our recovery, devised from all eternity, gradually revealed to man after his fall by types and prophecies, until in the fullness of time his Deliverer appeared, the Incarnate Son of God, who in His own Body bore our sins on the Cross of shame; who died and rose again, and ascended up to Heaven, carrying thither the Human Nature glorified, and will come from thence at the last day to gather His Saints, that they may be with Him where He now is, and behold His glory. It tells us that the present life is a life of probation and discipline for immortality; so that our life in the future will be that of happiness or misery, according to our conduct in the life that now is. And what I would ask you to consider well is this. Do you not find in the analogies of the present life the foreshadowings of this coming dispensation? Do not obedience in childhood, and morality and industry in youth, lead onwards to a happy and honourable manhood? Does not a present imprudent gratification constantly entail upon us distress, apparently out of all proportion to the momentary pleasure? Do we not see that virtue on the whole is that which secures the favour of mankind, and vice their reproach? Is it not the case

that, in general and in the long run, the good man prospers, and the bad man comes to naught? And do not these considerations, and many more that might be mentioned, point very significantly to a place of retribution hereafter, and to a strict and impartial judgment according to the deeds done in the body?

But the Bible has its positive as well as its probable evidences, and it is to these that I desire to invite your attention during the remainder of this sermon. How do we know the Bible to be indeed that which it claims to be; namely, a Book containing a direct revelation from Heaven to man? Well, with many of us it is a sufficient evidence of this that our hearts and consciences at once respond to its truth, as we perceive how it adapts itself to all the wants and cravings of our moral and spiritual being. Everyone who is really ruminated by the Holy Spirit will feel a strong consciousness, an irresistible conviction, that it is indeed the Word of God. But this evidence, however satisfactory to the believer, is of no value to the unbeliever, who therefore may fairly ask to be furnished with such evidence as ought to suffice with regard to any other documents which claim to be genuine and authentic. He will object to the believer the impossibility of obtaining evidence, properly so called, of remote facts; but you can retort upon him his own acceptance of the certainty of events as ancient as those the truth of which he calls in question, and you can prove to him that reasons still stronger than those which constrain him to admit the truth of other events (such as the number of witnesses, the agreement of historians, and the sacrifices made to confirm the testimony) ought to constrain him to believe the facts by which Revelation is attested.

Take the Old Testament. The Old Testament, as we have it in our Authorized Version, is the same to all intents and purposes as that which was preserved in Hebrew by the Jewish Church, treasured up in their archives, and constantly read in their synagogues. More than this, the Old Testament, as it is now in the hands of the Jews, wherever they are, is just the same as the Old Testament in the hands of Christian Churches throughout the world. The Jewish historian, Josephus, says of the Books of the Old Testament, "Although so long a time has elapsed since these Books were written, yet no one has ever ventured to make any addition to them, or to take anything from them, or to make any change in them. And it is a principle with every Jew to regard these Books as the oracles of God, and to cleave to them; ay, and to die gladly for them."

But, further than this; our Blessed Lord, when He came into the world, claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God, who had now appeared in human nature to give a new revelation to man, He put the stamp of His Divine authority upon the Old Testament, affirming that all things that were written in it concerning the promised Messiah must be fulfilled in Him.

But, again, it will be asked, How were all these things attested to the world? And our answer is, By the evidence of Miracles and of Prophecy.

Miracles attest the truth of the Old Testament. They also attest the truth of the New. They sparkle as diamonds on the pages of both. And if they are not sufficient to carry conviction, I would commend to him who entertains doubts, the famous dilemma of St. Augustine: "If," he says, "the miracles recorded by our writers be true, they give evident proof of the truth of Holy Scripture. If there were actually no such miracles, but all were pretended, then this would be a miracle above all miracles – that the Christian religion should prevail against all other arts, power, or policy, without any extraordinary event or miracle to accredit it." [Quoted by Dean Jackson, vol. i. p. 21.] Assume the miracles to be real and true, and you can then account for the universal acceptance of the Jewish and Christian dispensations; and you cannot easily account for it in any other way.

Then, further, does not the independence and yet the close connection of the Old and New Testaments afford a striking argument for the truth of both? Can you conceive it possible that there should have been two revelations, published with an interval between them of more than four hundred years, and the first of them spreading over more than a thousand years, – both of them claiming to be received upon the same kind of evidence; both of them taking their rise from the dates of the wonderful facts which are said to have attested them, the one the type, and the other the antitype – the one the shadow, the other the substance; and yet that neither of them should be true, more especially when it is remembered that the Old Testament contains the annals of a nation, and that nation designed in its memorable history to be figurative and prophetic of the Christian Church?

Then look at the narratives of the miracles. How simple, and yet how graphic they are! They bear the impress of truth on their very surface. Take, for example, the accounts given us of the Resurrection of our Lord. They were simpleminded, trustworthy persons, those first witnesses of the Resurrection; and the details of that event were asserted by them with all

the simple majesty of truth. There were no rhetorical efforts, no attempts to gild the gold of their statements. What they had to say was simply this – that they had with their own eyes, in different places and at different times, seen their risen Lord. They who had known Him before His Crucifixion, knew Him again; the form, the features, the voice, were the same. They had been allowed to handle Him. They had seen the print of the nails in His Hands, and the mark of the spear in His Side. They had eaten and drunk with Him after He had risen from the dead. Had they anything to gain by publishing these things? On the contrary, they had much to lose. And yet they were constant and united, preaching the Resurrection of Christ all their lives, and stoutly maintaining it in their deaths. Surely, if there is any faith in history, any truth in human intercourse, any confidence in man, the Resurrection of Jesus is compassed about with evidence which must carry conviction, as long as there is any sincerity, or reason, or faith, in the world.

But the truth of Holy Scripture rests also on the evidence of prophecy. Look, then, at the prophecies relating to the Jewish people, spreading over a long series of years, and many generations of men. I do not now refer to these prophecies in their typical and figurative relation to the Messiah and His Kingdom. I speak of them in their primary and literal meaning. Well, these prophecies (so wonderfully fulfilled) satisfied the Jews as to their Divine character, nothing but the Divine foreknowledge being capable of dictating them.

Then, if we consider the prophecies relating to Christ, how remarkable it is that the Books containing these prophecies should have been preserved by the enemies of Christianity, and translated into another language with the utmost care some two hundred years before Christ appeared! And yet how full the Old Testament is of Christ! The prophecies of Isaiah, for example, and the Psalms – why, they are really the history of our Lord by anticipation, and that, too, in some of the most minute particulars.

Well, I trust that what has been said is sufficient to show how inexcusable those must be who, being within easy access of the evidence as to the revelation of the Gospel, do not use their best and most honest endeavours to satisfy themselves as to its truth. There is no age in the civilized world since the coming of Christ which has not been convinced by reasons such as I have ventured to suggest this morning, and which by the force of conviction has not been constrained to accept the Holy Scriptures

as the very Word of God. At the time when our Saviour appeared, the temple of Janus was closed, peace reigned in the world, arts and sciences were flourishing, and the Schools of philosophy of Greece and Rome were famous; and yet by degrees the study and search of Holy Scripture prevailed over all; and when a Celsus or a Porphyry hoped to crush Christianity by opposing philosophy, falsely so called, to it, there were not wanting men like Origen, who forsook philosophy to follow Christ. And they found, as every rightminded man will find, that Divine truth is, of all other truths, that which most commends itself to the reason and the conscience. And as this truth is in its own nature inexhaustible, so a belief in it, once planted and rooted in the soul, and watered with the dew of God's blessing, will strengthen and increase the more we apply our minds and affections to it; so that true Christian belief knows no limit in this life, but still comes nearer and nearer to that fullness of knowledge which shall swallow it up in the life to come.

Brethren, the times in which our lot is cast are such as greatly to enhance the duty which is laid upon all Christians to give a reason for the hope that is in them. We are accustomed to pride ourselves upon being a Christian nation. Our National Church, happily reformed after the pattern of primitive Christianity, has spread its influence throughout our great Empire, and is regarded with respect and admiration everywhere; and it is doubtless the influence of Christianity, as held and taught by our Church, which has hitherto made England strong. But when the Bishop of London, speaking a few days ago in his Cathedral to the assembled clergy and laity of his diocese (speaking with all the weight and authority which belongs to his great position and high character), tells us that "there are hundreds of thousands, here in our midst, to all appearance godless"; that "infidelity is the religion of multitudes, with its propaganda, its preachers, and its literature, sometimes able and acute, sometimes obscene and blasphemous"; and that "a large section of the community possess neither belief nor unbelief, but are satisfied to live here without perplexing themselves about a problematical hereafter"; – it is surely no time for Christians to be supine and indifferent, still less to be divided amongst themselves. Let us not, then, shrink from the duty which is imposed upon us of giving some account of our faith, some reason for the hope that is in us. We owe it to ourselves and to the world to do this: to ourselves, in order to show that our faith and hope are not vain things; and to the world, that we may be witnesses for Christ

amidst the skepticism and vice by which we are surrounded, and, God helping us, may by all means save some. Do not let anyone who listens to me be discouraged from making the effort. No word spoken for Christ “with meekness and Godly fear” can ever be without its effect. Remember, too, that truth in its own nature must be superior to error. The persuasion of a man who deceives himself can never be equal to that of a man who does not deceive himself. Truth has its own self-evidencing, commanding influence. There may be truths which lie beyond the reach of my capacity; and there may be mental and moral defects in me which may interfere with my acceptance of a truth, or there may be corrupt affections in me which may make me wish that such and such a truth could not be proved. But all this cannot alter truth itself. It has a real intrinsic brightness of its own, which no human weakness or ignorance or vice can altogether quench.

Will anyone deny that it is at least a possible thing, or a probable thing, that Christianity may be true? Then I say that one single degree of probability in the system of Christianity is fatal to the whole system of the skeptic. What real satisfaction can a man of sense or reason find in that independence of which infidelity boasts, if there is even the probability that after all Christianity may be true? Is the system of the infidel so self-evident, so transparently clear, that on the strength of it he is prepared to risk the shipwreck of all his hopes for the future? Why, the heavens that declare the glory of God, and the firmament that showeth His handywork; this mighty Universe, with its precise and intricate and yet harmonious machinery; these bodies of ours, so fearfully and wonderfully made; our faculties of mind, which remind us of our immortality; the reasonableness of a revelation; the way in which it meets our necessities and satisfies our cravings as immortal beings; the evidences of miracle and prophecy, and all the other arguments which combine to establish its truth; – convict that man of a credulity of which a child might be ashamed, who accepts instead of these a few rash conjectures and hasty conclusions, which leave him without God in this world, and without hope in the world to come.

May God give us grace that, being not like children carried away with every blast of vain doctrine, we may be established in the truth of His holy Gospel, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.