

John Wesley

SERMON 55

(text from the 1872 edition)^

ON THE TRINITY

ADVERTISEMENT

Some days since I was desired to preach on this text. I did so yesterday morning. In the afternoon I was pressed to write down and print my sermon, if possible, before I left Cork. I have wrote it this morning; but I must beg the reader to make allowance for the disadvantages I am under; as I have not here any books to consult, nor indeed any time to consult them.

Cork, May 8, 1775. "*There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one.*" 1 John 5:7.

1. Whatsoever the generality of people may think, it is certain that opinion is not religion: No, not right opinion; assent to one, or to ten thousand truths. There is a wide difference between them: Even right opinion is as distant from religion as the east is from the west. Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all; and, on the other hand, persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions. Can any one possibly doubt of this, while there are Romanists in the world? For who can deny, not only that many of them formerly have been truly religious, as Thomas a Kempis, Gregory Lopez, and the Marquis de Renty; but that many of them, even at this day, are real inward Christians? And yet what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers! Nay, who can doubt of it while there are Calvinists in the world -- assertors of absolute predestination? For who will dare to affirm that none of these are truly religious men? Not only many of them in the last century were burning and shining lights, but many of them are now real Christians, loving God and all mankind. And yet what are all the absurd opinions of all the Romanists in the world, compared to that one, that the God of love, the wise, just, merciful Father of the spirits of all flesh, has, from all eternity, fixed an absolute, unchangeable, irresistible, decree, that part of all mankind shall be saved, do what they will; and the rest damned, do what they can!

2. Hence, we cannot but infer, that there are ten thousand mistakes which may consist with real religion; with regard to which every candid, considerate man will think and let think. But there are some truths more important than others. It seems there are some which are of deep importance. I do not term them *fundamental* truths; because that is an ambiguous word: And hence there have been so many warm disputes about the number of *fundamentals*. But surely there are some which it nearly concerns us to know, as having a close connexion with vital religion. And doubtless we may rank among these that

contained in the words above cited: ~There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one.

3. I do not mean that it is of importance to believe this or that *explication* of these words. I know not that any well judging man would attempt to explain them at all. One of the best tracts which that great man, Dean Swift, ever wrote, was his Sermon upon the Trinity. Herein he shows, that all who endeavored to explain it at all, have utterly lost their way; have, above all other persons hurt the cause which they intended to promote; having only, as Job speaks, "darkened counsel by words without knowledge." It was in an evil hour that these explainers began their fruitless work I insist upon no explication at all; no, not even on the best I ever saw; I mean, that which is given us in the creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius. I am far from saying, he who does not assent to this ~shall without doubt perish everlastingly." For the sake of that and another clause, I, for some time, scrupled subscribing to that creed; till I considered~ (1.) That these sentences only relate to *wilful*, not involuntary, unbelievers; to those who, having all the means of knowing the truth, nevertheless obstinately reject it: (2.) that they relate only to the *substance* of the doctrine there delivered; not the philosophical *illustrations* of it.

4. I dare not insist upon any one's using the word Trinity, or Person. I use them myself without any scruple, because I know of none better: But if any man has any scruple concerning them, who shall constrain him to use them? I cannot: Much less would I burn a man alive, and that with moist, green wood, for saying, ~Though I believe the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; yet I scruple using the words *Trinity* and *Persons*, because I do not find those terms in the Bible." These are the words which merciful John Calvin cites as wrote by Servitus in a letter to himself. I would insist only on the direct words, unexplained, just as they lie in the text: "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one."

5. "As they lie in the text : " -- but here arises a question: Is that text genuine? Was it originally written by the Apostle, or inserted in later ages? Many have doubted of this; and, in particular, the great light of the Christian church, lately removed to the Church above, Bengelius, -- the most pious, the most judicious, and the most laborious, of all the modern Commentators on the New Testament. For some time he stood in doubt of its authenticity, because it is wanting in many of the ancient copies. But his doubts were removed by three considerations: (1.) That though it is wanting in many copies, yet it is found in more; and those copies of the greatest authority: -- (2.) That it is cited by a whole gain of ancient writers, from the time of St. John to that of Constantine. This argument is conclusive: For they could not have cited it, had it not been in the sacred canon: -- (3.) That we can easily account for its being, after that time, wanting in many copies, when we remember that Constantine's successor was a zealous Arian, who used every means to promote his bad cause, to spread Arianism throughout the empire; in particular the erasing this text out of as many copies as fell into his hands. And he so far prevailed, that the age in which he lived is commonly styled, *_Seculum Aranium_*, -- "the Arian age;" there being then only one eminent man who opposed him at the peril of his life. So that it was a proverb, *_Athanasius contra mundum_*: "Athanasius against the world."

6. But it is objected: ~"Whatever becomes of the text, we cannot believe what we cannot comprehend. When, therefore, you require us to believe mysteries, we pray you to have us excused."

Here is a two-fold mistake: (1.) We do not require you to believe any mystery in this; whereas; you suppose the contrary. But, (2.) You do already believe many things which you cannot comprehend.

7. To begin with the latter: You do already believe many things which you cannot comprehend. For you believe there is a *sun* over your head. But whether he stands still in the midst of his system, or not only revolves on his own axis, but ~rejoiceth as a giant to run his course; you cannot comprehend either one or the other: *How* he moves, or *how* he rests. By what power, what natural, mechanical power, is he upheld in the fluid either? You cannot deny the fact: Yet you cannot account for it, so as you satisfy any rational inquirer. You may indeed give us the hypothesis of Ptolemy, Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, and twenty more. I have read them over and over: I am sick of them; I care not three straws for them all.

Each new solution but once more affords
New change of terms, and scaffolding of words:
In other garb my question I receive,
And take my doubt the very same I gave.

Still I insist, the *fact* you believe, you cannot deny; but the *manner* you cannot comprehend.

8. You believe there is such a thing as *light*, whether flowing from the sun, or any other luminous body; but you cannot comprehend either its nature. or the manner wherein it flows. How does it move from Jupiter to the earth in eight minutes; two hundred thousand miles in a moment? How do the rays of the candle, brought into the room, instantly disperse into every corner? Again: Here are three candles, yet there is but one light. I explain this, and I will explain the Three-One God.

9. You believe there is such a thing as *air*. It both covers you as a garment, and,

Wide interfused,
Embraces round this florid earth.

But can you comprehend how? Can you give me a satisfactory account of its nature, or the cause of its properties? Think only of one, its elasticity: Can you account for this? It may be owing to electric fire attached to each particle of it; it may not; and neither you nor I can tell. But if we will not breathe it till we can comprehend it, our life is very near its period.

10. You believe there is such a thing as earth. Here you fix your foot upon it: You are supported by it. But do you comprehend what it is that supports the earth? "O, an elephant, says a Malabarian philosopher "and a bull supports him." But what supports the bull? The Indian and the Briton are equally at a loss for an answer. We know it is God that "spreadeth the north over the empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. This is the fact. But how? Who can account for this? Perhaps angelic but not human creatures.

I know what is plausibly said concerning the powers of projection and attraction. But spin as fine as we can, matter of fact sweeps away our cobweb hypothesis. Connect the force of projection and attraction how you can, they will never produce a circular motion. The moment the projected steel comes within the attraction of the magnet, it does not form a curve, but drops down.

11. You believe you have a *soul*. "Hold there," says the Doctor; [Dr. Blair, in his late tract.] I believe no such thing. "If *you* have an immaterial soul so have the brutes too." I will not quarrel with any that think they have; nay, I wish he could prove it:

And surely I would rather allow *them* souls, than I would give up my own. In this I cordially concur in the sentiment of the honest Heathen. _Si erro, libenter erro; et me redargui valde recusem_. ~"If I err, I err willingly; and I vehemently refuse to be convinced of it." And I trust most of those who do not belie a Trinity are of the same mind. Permit me then to go on. You believe you have a soul connected with this house of clay. But can you comprehend how? ~What are the ties that unite the heavenly flame with the earthly clod? You understand just nothing of the matter. So it is; but how none can tell.

12. You surely believe you have a *body*, together with your soul, and that each is dependent on the other. Run only a thorn into your hand; immediately pain is felt in your soul. On the other side is shame felt in your soul? Instantly a blush overspreads your cheek. Does the soul feel fear or violent anger? Presently the body trembles. These also are facts which you cannot deny; nor can you account for them.

13. I bring but one instance more: At the command of your soul, your hand is lifted up. But who is able to account for this? For the connexion between the act of the mind, and the outward actions? Nay, who can account for *_muscular motion_* at all; in any instance of it whatever? When one of the most ingenious Physicians in England had finished his lecture upon that head, he added, ~Now, gentlemen, I have told you all the discoveries of our enlightened age; and now, if you understand one jot of the matter, you understand more than I do." The short of the matter is this: Those who will not believe anything but what they can comprehend, must not believe that there is a sun in the firmament; that there is light shining around them; that there is air, though it encompasses them on every side; that there is any earth, though they stand upon it. They must not believe they have a soul; no, nor that they have a body.

14. But, secondly, as strange as it may seem. in requiring you to believe, "there are three that bear record in heaven the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one;" you are not required to believe any mystery. Nay, that, great and good man, Dr. Peter Browne, sometime Bishop of Cork, has proved at large that the Bible does not require you to believe any mystery at all. Thee Bible barely requires you to believe such facts; not the manner of them. Now the mystery does not lie in the *fact*, but altogether in the manner.

For instance: ~God said, let there be light: And there was light." I believe it: I believe the plain *fact*: There is no mystery at all in this. The mystery lies in the *manner* of it. But of this I believe nothing at all; nor does God require it of me.

Again: "The Word was made flesh." I Believe this fact also. There is no mystery in it; but as to the *manner how* he was made flesh, wherein the mystery lies, I know nothing about it; I believe nothing about it: It is no more the object of my faith, than it is of my understanding.

15. To apply this to the case before us: ~There are three that bear record in heaven: And these three are One.~ I believe this *fact* also, (if I may use the expression,) that God is Three and One. But the *manner how* I do not comprehend and I do not believe it. Now in this, in the *manner*, lies the mystery; and so it may; I have no concern with it: It is no object of my faith: I believe just so much as God has revealed, and no more. But this, the *manner*, he has not revealed; therefore, I believe nothing about it. But would it not be absurd in me to deny the fact, because I do not understand the manner? That is, to reject *what God has revealed* because I do not comprehend *what he has not revealed*.

16. This is a point much to be observed. There are many things "which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive. Part of these God Hath "revealed to us by his Spirit~:" -- "*Revealed*;" that is, unveiled, uncovered: That part he requires us to believe. Part of them he has not revealed: That we need not, and indeed cannot, believe: It is far above, out of our sight.

Now, where is the wisdom of rejecting what is revealed, because we do not understand what is not revealed? of denying the *fact* which God has unveiled, because we cannot see the *manner*, which is veiled still?

17. Especially when we consider that what God has been pleased to reveal upon his head, is far from being a point of indifference, is a truth of the last importance. It enters into the very heart of Christianity: It lies at the heart of all vital religion.

Unless these Three are One, how can "all men honour the Son, even as they honour the Father?" "I know not what to do," says Socinus in a letter to his friend, with my untoward followers: They will not worship Jesus Christ. I tell them it is written, `Let all the angels of God worship him.' They answer, However that be, if he is not God, we dare not worship him. For `it is written, Thou shalt worship the lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.'"

But the thing, which I here particularly mean is this: The knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion.

I do not say that every real Christian can say with the Marquis de Renty, "I bear about with me continually an experimental verity, and a plenitude of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity." I apprehend this is not the experience of ~babes~, " but, rather, "fathers in Christ."

But I know not how any one can be a Christian believer till he "hath," as St. John speaks, "the witness in himself;" till "the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit, that he is a child of God;" that is, in effect, till God the holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son: And, having this witness, he honours the Son, and the blessed Spirit, "even as he honours the Father."

18. Not that every Christian believer *advert*s to this; perhaps, at first, not one in twenty: But if you ask any of them a few questions, you will easily find it is implied in what he believes. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these Three are one. And all my hope for them is, not that they will be saved during their unbelief, (unless on the footing of honest Heathens, upon the plea of invincible ignorance,) but that God, before they go hence, "will bring them to the knowledge of the truth."

[Edited by David R. Leonard (student at Northwest Nazarene College) with corrections by George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene College (Nampa, Idaho) for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.]

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