

False and True Worship

A SERMON Preached on Sunday Morning May 5th 1867, by

MR. JAMES WELLS

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

“But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” Matt. xv. 9

There is a large portion of so-called Christendom composed of those that do not worship the Lord at all. They do not remember their Creator in the days of their youth nor in the days of their old age, and such, of course, dying in that state, must be lost. And then it is a solemn and self-evident truth to all those that savingly know the truth that there is a large portion of Christendom composed of those that worship the Lord in error, by false doctrine, by that which the Lord ever did and ever will despise. Is it not therefore, a matter of very solemn inquiry with us whether we hold the truth in the love and spirit of it all? We hear some people, of whom we think well, say that does not matter about doctrine; if you believe in Jesus Christ, never mind doctrine. If you take the word “doctrine” to mean an article of faith; or if you use the plural, and take the word doctrines to mean articles of faith, then it will mean the testimonies of God concerning Jesus Christ; and therefore, how you are to believe in Jesus Christ without believing what God says concerning him I know not; how are to believe in Jesus Christ and to receive him savingly without receiving the testimonies given concerning him I know not. Are we not, then, most awfully deluding ourselves if we are saying that doctrine does not much matter, or that doctrine is a secondary thing? I will, indeed, in one sense go further than this; I will go so far as to say that Jesus Christ doth not much matter to us if our profession of him be a false profession; his name will avail us nothing. But if our profession of him be real, then he is to us everything—our life now and our life and treasure to the endless ages of eternity. And what says David of the doctrines when he calls them testimonies? “Thy testimonies are very sure.” And in another place he says, “Thy testimonies have I taken as a heritage forever.” It does appear to me that we live in a day when nine-tenths of the preaching preaches that into the minds of the people of which they are already full. Every man has a notion that he is simply to believe in Christ; that he can come to Christ; and that it is his duty to come to Christ; that it is his duty to be saved; and it is his own fault if he is not saved. These are the notions which are entertained from the lowest profligate to the highest Pharisaic Professor in the world. And what do the majority of our ministers do? Why they go and confirm them in these delusions. It is true they do so religiously, and bring about some moral and mental conversions; but the soul its self, notwithstanding this moral conversion, is in the same state that it was before; it entertains the same notions, the same sentiments, the same ideas, only it says, I will now practice what I have always held. That is what it amounts to. What saith our text? “In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

I will, for the sake of condensation, take a threefold view of our subject this morning. I will first try to be clear upon this all-important matter in showing why it is vain to worship the Lord by the commandments of men. Secondly, what were the doctrines that the ancients went out of the world in the belief of. Thirdly and lastly, what is that special representation of doctrine that shall sum up all things finally.

First, then, I notice why it is vain to worship the Lord by the commandments of men. I will take a fourfold view of this terrible subject. I say terrible, for can you imagine anything more awful than the soul being deceived? And do you not read of the great enemy deceiving the whole world? Do you not read that solemn scripture with some degree of prayerfulness to the Lord, that "if it were possible, he should deceive the very elect"? Let us then look at the reasons. First, no worship can be acceptable to the Lord that is not in harmony with what he is. Now, then, what can bring us into harmony with what he is? For that service which is hostile to his holiness, justice, law, and integrity, cannot, it is self-evident, cannot be acceptable unto him. Let us, then, see wherein this matter lies. Take the dear Savior in his atonement. You receive that atonement in its perfection. What doth that atonement do? Why, it brings you into entire harmony with the holiness, justice, integrity, and all the perfections of the most high God. There you may have confidence in God, because there he can be just as well as merciful; there he can be righteous, at the same time gracious; there he can be just, and yet the justifier; there you stand in sweet harmony with him. But put this atonement in its eternal perfection out, and bring in any ceremony, any doing of man; can that put you into harmony with God? Can it put you where David was? That is a lovely scripture, and his heart rejoiced in the thought of it when he put that testimony upon record. He saith, "My foot standeth in an even place;" and then he brings out the gratitude of his heart to the Lord for bringing him by faith to the promised Melchizedek, that wondrous Saviour revealed so clearly to him. He says, "In the congregations"-plural-"will I bless the Lord." As though he should say, I will bless the Lord while I am in the congregation militant; and when I join the congregation triumphant, I will still go on blessing the Lord that he has brought me thus into harmony with himself. Then, again, take the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ; see what that righteousness is; see how that brings us into harmony with what God is as a righteous God. And doth not the apostle, yea, the Scriptures everywhere show us the nothingness, the wretchedness of creature-righteousness? Are not our righteousness's spoken of as filthy rags? Why, the very expression itself seems, as it were, degrading, humiliating, and mortifying. But the righteousness of the dear Saviour is that that alone can enable us to give the challenge of the apostle, where he saith, "Do we though faith"- the faith that receives, Christ's righteousness -" make void the law? Yea, we establish the law. If this be your service, so far you do not worship the Lord in vain; for here you stand in harmony with him. And I ask the question-one that you can all answer for your selves; you can see it is answered,- Is there anything that holiness, law, or justice, or the character, or the honor, or the sovereignty of God requires, that is not found in Jesus Christ? Doth he not this the answer to everything? Is he not the brightness of Jehovah's glory, the express image of his person? So that unless you are in harmony with him, you cannot be accepted of him. In vain do you worship him by the commandments of men; and remember that every perversion of Scripture is what you may call a commandment of men.

The second reason why worship by error is in vain is because error cannot make us what the truth makes us. Let us hear what the truth makes us. Take the apostle Peter's words: - "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever." And in connection with those words he says, "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth." The living word of God implanted in the soul gives a vital, new existence to the soul; it gives spiritual life to the soul; that soul is made the subject of an experience that none other is the subject of. Can the sprinkling of a little water on the face of an infant or an adult ever minister one iota towards this? Can that which they call confirmation minister a particle of grace? Can taking the bread and wine, and substituting the mere elements for the vitality and reality, ever make the soul accepted before God? No; all such toil, such labor, such service, is indeed in vain. But the truth of God can make the soul a living soul. The soul is purified in obeying the truth. And the truth of God also experimentally reconciles the soul to God, which human tradition cannot do. Now the pardon of sin, reconciliation, friendship to God, assurance, in our day is got at generally speaking, logically. Beware, in divine things, of logical conclusions. A man is converted with the conversion of reformation; he is told by his minister that he is to infer from that change that his sins

are forgiven, that he is himself a saved man; he is to infer from this moral change that he is reconciled to God, and that all is well. Ah, what awful delusion is this, when at the same time, the man does not know his own heart: he does not know what it is to be cut down, or to be cut up, or to be shut up, or to be tossed about; he does not know what it is to feel what the apostle felt when he said, "O wretched man that I am!" He does not know what it is to feel what is meant, either on the one hand or on the other, when the prophet said, "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." "Then flew one of the seraphim"-that minister that God may be pleased to employ to carry home instrumentally the word with power, - "then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is purged." Hence he was brought experimentally into the peace of God, here was forgiveness, here was reconciliation; nothing but the truth of God can bring us into this experimental reconciliation to God. How many go to churches and to chapels, go through the forms, and, alas! alas! set themselves down, and others set them down, for Christians! But ah! except thou art born of this incorruptible Seed, except thou art convinced of thy condition, unless thou art made to thirst for God, and to seek after the realization of the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven, and to whom the Lord imputes righteousness without works.-except this be your state your worship is in vain, your service is in vain. "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." Though you may hold the Bible, and have the letter of the Bible, yet without this experience there is no real understanding of the same. True worship, then, is a knowledge of that completeness that is in Christ that bring us into entire harmony with the blessed God in what he is in his perfections and counsels that brings us experimentally into this reconciliation to the blessed God. But human traditions or the Scriptures perverted do neither of these things; they keep us at war with what God really is, and give us no experimental acquaintance with these things for ourselves. And we live in a day, also, when doubts and fears are thrown to the winds. Doubting and fearing, why, you should scorn and despise such things; away with your doubts, and away with your fears. Such persons show where they are. What! I be convinced of my state as a sinner, and have no experimental reason to believe that I am a saved man; yet not to doubt and fear! What! I walk in darkness, and feel the wickedness of my heart, and feel myself to be anything but a Christian, and not be jealous, and not suspect, and not question! What! the Lord hide his face, and the fountains of the great deep within are broken up, and I see no reason why I may conclude that I am a Christian, and my heart sinks at the thought of being deceived, and I am ready to say, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord;" yet these men tell me I am not to doubt and fear. They should distinguish between the doubts and fears of godly jealousy and the doubts and fears of infidelity. I never except in a very transitory, temporary way indeed, doubt God's truth; Satan may throw in a doubt sometimes, but as a general rule my doubts and fears are-

"Am I his, or am I not?"

My doubts and fears are-How will this circumstance go, and how will that go? My doubts and fears are-What sort of a day shall I have to-day? Will the Lord be with me, and support me? My doubts and fears are-- Will it be well with me when I come to cross the Jordan? In none of these things do I for a moment doubt God's truth; but I call in question as to where I am, and my spirit maketh diligent search. Will the Lord cast off forever? Will he be favorable no more? Has he forgotten to be gracious? Shall his promise fail forever? "For the divisions of Reuben there were great searching's of heart." If you are taught of God, these will be some of the searching's of heart of which you will be the subject. And therefore beware of that ministry, let it come by whom it may, that would say peace, where there is no peace: that would say, pardon, where there is no pardon; that would say, Salvation, where there is no salvation; and that would say, life, where there is no life. True religion, then, brings us out of every false refuge, and leads us only

to Christ in his completeness; it brings us into harmony with God; it brings vitality into the soul, and the soul begins to hunger and thirst, and inquire the way to Zion. Oh, saith one, it is no trouble to find the way to Zion. Christ says, "I am the way;" go direct to him; it is all easy enough. Ah, but there is a scripture that says, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." I know Christ is the way to heaven; but then I also know that I may be in that way professionally, and not vitally. Therefore the man taught of God asks, Am I there regenerationally? Am I there as a living soul? Am I in this way by the Spirit of God? And do I thus serve God acceptably? for I cannot unless I am in harmony with him, thus experimentally be reconciled to him. Those are two reasons, then, out of the four I shall name, why you cannot serve God acceptably by false doctrine. First, because it cannot bring you into harmony with God. But how beautifully has Christ brought us into this harmony. Solomon's Song is nothing but a gathering together and giving a brilliant illustration of what all the Old Testament saints were taught. - Christ himself without spot or blemish, and they by him without spot or blemish; thus brought into sweet harmony with the great Creator. And where is there a book in the New Testament that contains more of the work of the Holy Spirit than the Book of Psalms? If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he cannot worship God acceptably, because his worship is of the flesh. "They that are in the flesh cannot please God," but he that is in the Spirit, that is, the man that worships God by Christ Jesus, and has no confidence in the flesh.

The third reason you cannot serve God acceptably by human tradition or the commandments of men, is (and it will increase in solemnity as it goes on) because those commandments inspire deadly enmity against God. By virtue of what was it that the ancients hated, persecuted, and slew the prophets? They did it by virtue of false doctrine. By virtue of what was it that the Pharisees hated, misrepresented, reviled, and, alas! Crucified the Savior? Was it not by virtue of false doctrine? They held doctrines contrary to covenant truth, and those doctrines inspired them with that malice and enmity by which they slew the Saviour. These doctrines of men inspire enmity against the truth. Do you not see this everywhere? Where is there a minister of truth that is not called an Antinomian, that is not called a devil, and is not fit to live. And if you bring a friend of a legal bias to hear such a minister, and hope he will be pleased, if he should happen to go away expressing his dislike of that minister, perhaps you feel upset about it. Well you would rather his eyes had been opened, that he should speak well of the minister; but you may depend upon it that the carnal mind cannot love spiritual things. What! I come before God with a heart full of enmity against his truth, and yet expect to be received! Oh, what blindness! Well, but, Lord, do take notice that I fast twice in the week, and that I pay tithes of all I possess; and I not only possess these positive qualities, but I am also good negatively, for I do not do anything wrong. In a word, I am not like that publican. Ah, that publican - I declare I would not have come if I thought he had been coming; I would not have been in the same place with him; I would have stopped till he was gone. Ah, he may well stand afar off; he may well smite upon his breast; he may well be afraid to lift up his eyes to heaven-the wretch. But, dear creature that I am, I shall be received. See the contrast between the two characters. The poor profligate saw, and felt, and knew he had nothing but sin to call his own, burst out with a shout but an effectual, I was going to say a saving prayer- "God be merciful to me a sinner." That man went down to his house, and the Lord went after him, pouring blessing after blessing into his soul, till he realized justification by the eternal mercy of God; and then his peace became as a river, his righteousness as the waves of the sea. Thus the one, then, whose goodness inspired him with enmity against the truth, was rejected; the other, whose sin humbled him down before God was accepted, and magnified the mercy and salvation of the Lord. Now if any of you ever again say, "I am not particular about doctrine," I have one favor to beg of you,-pray do not say you go to the Surrey Tabernacle if you say that; pray do not say you are a seat holder here; pray do not say you are a hearer here; keep that to yourself, pray do; for I should be utterly ashamed of you; thus to say that it does not matter about doctrine; that is, that it does not matter whether it is truth or whether it is falsehood.

The fourth reason that you cannot serve God acceptably except by his truth is that the Lord hates every false doctrine. I would that I could point out more ably than I can the infinite detestation in which the God of truth holds every doctrinal lie. He hates error as he hates the devil. Hear what the Savior said to those that were led by human tradition. After they said that Abraham was their father, and that God was their father he said, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts" - that is, "desires" as the word "lusts" ought there to be there- "of your father ye will do." "He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie he speaketh of his own, for he is a liar, and the father of it." Do not such words breathe forth infinite and eternal indignation? Why, you could not bring a worse thing into God's house than bring a lie; because if you bring a lie you bring the devil, and God hates it with infinite hatred. How did the fall take place? Everybody knows the fall took place in a very decent, moral, pious way. The fall took place by a newly manufactured godliness. Mr. Serpent, I hope you are religious. Religious! Of course I am. I am come to make you a great deal more religious than you are now. You are not half religious enough. Not religious enough? No. If you will but listen to me, you will get much more religious, and be much more religious. Why, look at that tree;-God hath not made you half so religious as you ought to be. You should have auxiliaries to the gospel; you should have helps to the gospel; you should put blocks under the ship, not trust her at sea without some support under her. The Lord has not made you half as religious as you ought to be. Well, but God has said we are not to eat of that tree. Ah, well, he did say so then, but you are improved now. That was when you were first created; you could not be trusted then, But there is the march of intellect now; you have got on now, and you must give up those old-fashioned notions; they were all very well then, but you are improved now. You must be scientific; you must have a little bit of science, and a little bit of this, and that, and the other; and I will make you really godly. Very well, how far? Why, you shall be as gods. You are nothing now in comparison with what you will be then. Well, said Eve, I should think my husband will never be so stupid as not to wish to get on in the world, or I would not have married him. I will take some and eat it, and if he is like me he will do the same; and then we shall both get up together. And so they did get up together, and an awful get up it was. Now all this was done under the garb of improvement -very pious, very good. Everything by which Satan intends to obscure and lessen the gospel is always in the shape of something very pious and very, advantageous. But for myself, I am an antique piece of goods, and God's old fashioned way is his only fashioned way, and God forbid that I should ever want to change. No; let us bind the gospel to our heart, and call everything else vanity and lies; remembering that God infinitely and eternally detests error. Was there not a wrath that rested upon Cain for coming before God with error? Has not God in all ages shown his indignation against error? How solemn is that circumstance upon this question of not standing purely by the truth when the prophet went to Bethel! He met with the old prophet, who received him with a great profession of friendship; and of course the old prophet had a very respectable name, a very great name. He said, "I am a prophet," and declared that the Lord had told him to bring the other back. Now if the good man had had his eyes open, he would have said, "The Lord told you to bring me back? Well, when the Lord tells me to go back, I will go; but not before." A great many people say,-Oh, the Lord told me this and that, and the other. Well, I say, when the Lord tells me, I will believe it; but not before; because if the Lord means me to do this, he is sure to tell me. What was the result? You see the solemn indignation of the Most High there that one of his servants should thus act, for a little worldly ease and probably attracted by the idea that he should have a good name if he went back with this old prophet, in a spirit of so called charity. A lion met the man of God, and slew him; his end expressive of the indignation of the Lord. On the other hand, would that I could set forth the infinity and eternity of the delight that God has in his truth, that yea and amen truth that he has confirmed in and by his dear Son!-"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God looks upon the promise, and he is delighted to think he made it. He looks upon his dear Son, and he is delighted to think he sent him. And Christ was delighted to come, and he was delighted to go to heaven; he delights to reign, and he delights to receive sinners. Ah, the piece of silver found, the lost sheep brought home, the poor prodigal

come back to his Father's house, fills all heaven with delight. Ah, saith one, I am delighted with Gods blessed truth. Well then, the Lord and you are in harmony. "Delight thyself in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." If he hates error with infinite and eternal indignation, he loves truth, delights and glories in it, and will forever. Some of you I dare say in your time have made promises you have been sorry for afterward. Well, the Lord promised Saul that he should be king, and afterwards repented that he had made him king. But that was a conditional promise. He was to be king and to reign on the ground of his conformity to the covenant under which he was. But the promises that are in Christ Jesus, the gifts and counsels of God there, are without repentance.

But lastly upon this point;-It does not matter about doctrine; believe in Christ. That is the language of some. It does not matter what sort of Jesus Christ it is. Now the Jews of old believed in a coming Messiah. Again and again they said to the Savior, Art thou that Christ? Art thou the Son of God? Art thou the King of Israel? They believed in a Christ, but they had perverted the scriptures. You may be like an angel in your life; you may have the best nature of any man in the world; you may give your goods to feed the poor, and your body to be burned at the last; but if you have not the truth of God as the inspiration of your love you are included in that people, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" You are of those who wrest the scriptures unto their own destruction. See, then it begins with vain worship, goes on in nonconformity to God, goes on in formality without vitality, goes on into increased enmity against his truth, until you arrive at that tremendous stage of the scene,-"How can ye escape the damnation of hell?" The Lord give us grace to pray to him, that we may realize in our experience the Savior's promise concerning the Holy Spirit,-"He shall guide you into all truth; ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." After thus showing the impossibility of worshipping God acceptably except by his truth, the next thing I ought to do would be to show the advantages of worshipping him aright; but those advantages are innumerable and eternal, and some of them will come out in a measure in our next proposition.

Secondly, what were the doctrines that the ancients went out of the world in the belief of? Are there any peculiar doctrines connected with their death that we may ascertain whereabouts they were? I will pass by the antediluvians, and come down to Jacob for the first. What was the doctrine which Jacob died in? He died in, or held in his dying hour, first, the doctrine of eternal redemption. "The angel which redeemed me from all evil;"-here is the completeness and eternity of that redemption; that is the doctrine he held. "The angel" of the covenant, "which redeemed me from all evil." And of course he held the doctrine of a special providence; - "The God which fed me all my life long unto this day." Another doctrine in which he died was the completeness and certainty of God's salvation. "I have waited, O Lord, for thy salvation." Now says the apostle Paul, "By grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Let us ask ourselves, how will it be with us in that eventful hour? For die we must. I want a religion now that will support me then; satisfy, and secure, and make me happy then. Then, again, was David content to die in a vague, bare, blind, unintelligent, ignorant faith in God? David enters death with these doctrines;-"He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure; this is all my salvation "- nothing can be brought against me which this covenant doth not swallow up,-"and all my desire;" and if he doth not make it to grow, if I am not so happy as I could wish, he could say, if the words had then been in existence,-

"Happier, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven."

That is where David died. The apostle Paul sums up the whole of it thus: - "These all died in faith." Take, then, the doctrine of eternal redemption, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of the everlasting

covenant; then the apostle's testimony, "These all died in faith." I never can quote those words without being tempted to go on to what follows; it is something so beautiful: "These all died in faith"-not having quite eyed the precepts; not being quite perfect; looking to the time when they should reach the top of the precept, and then claim heaven on the ground of their doings! If it read thus, the Bible would be no use to a sinner. Where then, did these dreadfully Antinomian, high doctrine people die? Why, they "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off." They were such poor creatures, they could rest upon nothing but the promises, they could live upon nothing but the promises; they could hope only in a promise-performing God. They saw the promises "afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth;" and in the strength of those promises they journeyed on from strength to strength. Thus, then, Jacob died in the promise of eternal redemption and salvation; and David died in the doctrine of the everlasting covenant, and all the ancients died in the yea and amen promises. I need not come to the New Testament and remind you of the doctrines there held by the saints of God.

Lastly, then, let me briefly notice what is that special representation of doctrine that shall sum up all things finally. Now what would you think that doctrine is that appears the most prominent in the ultimate summing up of all things? That doctrine is nothing more, nothing less, than the doctrine of eternal election. I will prove it by four scriptures. Revelation xiii. 8:-"All that dwell upon the earth shall worship him," the beast -- that is drawing towards the end, you see "whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." And what is this book of life, or this registration in heaven but eternal election?

"Twas grace inscribed my name
In God's eternal book."

I then go to Revelation xvii. 8:-"They that dwell on the earth shall wonder"- after the beast, that is, the general body of error-"whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." In the scripture I just now quoted it was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world;" but in this last scripture the people's names are represented as being written there from the foundation of the world. Is not that in accordance with what the apostle says, "Chosen in him before the foundation of the world"? Then I come to Revelation xx. 15:- "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." Then I come to the 21st chapter, at the 27th verse, "There shall in no wise enter into it"- that is, into the heavenly city,-:- "anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie - there it is; -" but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life," Oh, what emphasis, then, this gives to our text!- "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men;" that which cannot bring us into harmony with God, that which cannot experimentally reconcile us to God, that which cannot keep us in the love of God, that which cannot keep us in that that God loves, that by which we cannot escape the damnation of hell. But if led to receive this sovereign, discriminating truth, such then whose names are in the book of life shall be reconciled to that book of life; for "the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness;" and they shall see that the fountain, - the source of their salvation, is pure, being all of God, from first to last. Thus, then, the summing up of all things is, by that very truth, almost universally despised. The Lord make us earnest, the Lord make us bold, the Lord make us decided for these eternal things, for his name's sake.