

ble; that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

11. Is it your desire and design to be, on this and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the five following at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

*A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*¹

Editor's introduction. Wesley was fond of dilating on the Christian ideal. In *The Character of a Methodist* and *The Principles of a Methodist* (1742), in the *Appeals* (1744-45) and in his sermons he frequently undertook to delineate the character of the perfect Christian — without, however, claiming this character for himself or ascribing it to other living persons. Here, in this *Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*, he again invokes the ideal, now to turn it to apologetic purposes.

In 1749 Dr. Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), a Cambridge don who was essentially a deist, published *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which Are Supposed to Have Subsisted in the Christian Church from the Earliest Ages through Several Successive Centuries; By Which It Is Shown that We Have No Sufficient Reason to Believe, Upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, that Any Such Powers Were Continued to the Church After the Days of the Apostles*. His ostensible aim was to reject the doctrinal authority of "Christian antiquity" and "to fix the religion of Protestants on its proper basis, that is, on the sacred Scriptures . . ." (p. cxi). But an orthodox reader could scarcely miss the point that Middleton's sweeping rejection of the "miraculous powers" in the period immediately following the apostolic age might readily be

1. The copy text is the first edition (Dublin, 1753), collated with the third edition (Bristol, 1761), *Works* (Pine), XVIII, 252-75, and the sixth (1779).

extended to exclude them from the age of the Apostles and from the New Testament itself. Conversely, the counterargument that it would take an infallible church to validate both Scripture and antiquity seemed to deliver the church of the Fathers into the hands of an infallible magisterium — and this way lay popery! Indeed, Middleton's book was one of the decisive factors in Edward Gibbon's "conversion" to Rome (transient though it was).²

Wesley read the *Inquiry* in loose sheets in late December 1748. "January 2, Monday [1749] — I had designed to set out with a friend for Rotterdam; but being much pressed to answer Dr. Middleton's book against the Fathers, I postponed my voyage and spent almost twenty days in that unpleasing employment."³ The result was *A Letter to the Reverend Doctor Conyers Middleton, Occasioned by His Late Free Enquiry*.⁴ It is an extended and detailed refutation, involving much analysis of the patristic texts invoked by Middleton and a discussion of their exegesis and interpretation. It failed, however, to make much of an impression either on Middleton, or on the other orthodox critics who quickly ranged themselves alongside Wesley. This was partly because of Wesley's careless handling of Middleton's text,⁵ and partly because his deepest concern was not with the scholarly issues involved, but with the practical threat to piety posed by Middleton's clever sophistries — despite all his straight-faced profession of loyalty to "the sacred Scriptures"!

It is quite in character, therefore, that after some sixty pages of academic disputation, Wesley switches his argument from the analysis of patristic texts over to a quite different line. The one point he really cared to make is that actual Christian faith and life, not only in apostolic and patristic but also still in modern times, reflects the supernatural power of God and the miraculous presence of the Holy Spirit. If *this* thesis is acknowledged, then the rest of Middleton's case collapses, in Wesley's view, as just another pointless distortion of the Christian message. He turns, therefore, to the familiar task of describing the ideal Christian and genuine Christianity, in terms which are meant to undercut Middleton's appeal to church history. The miracle of Christian living is the really essential miraculous power which *has* "subsisted in the Church" in

2. Cf. Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of The Life of Edward Gibbon*, G. Birkbeck Hill, ed. (1900), 67–69.

3. *Journal*, III, 390.

4. Reprinted in *Works* (Pine), XVIII, 140–276, and *Works*, X, 1–79.

5. A collation of Middleton's and Wesley's texts indicates that more than three-fourths of the latter's citations are inexact and garbled.

all ages, and is still present and active in the Christian community. The delineation of this power of Christian experience and life becomes the concluding section (VI) of his open letter to Middleton.

As if aware that the scholars would neglect his homiletical conclusion and that some of his unlearned readers might not wade through his disputation with the scholar to get to his homily on the Christian life, Wesley issued it as a separate sixteen-page pamphlet in 1753 (Dublin), under the title, *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*. In this form it was widely circulated for the rest of the century. It is this tract — with its echoes of its controversial context but with its main stress on the vitality of Christian experience — that we have chosen to represent Wesley's vision of the Christian ideal.



We [Middleton and Wesley] have been long disputing about "Christians," about "Christianity" and the "evidence" whereby it is supported. But what do these terms mean? Who is a Christian indeed? What is real, genuine Christianity? And what is the surest and most accessible evidence (if I may so speak) whereby I may know that it is of God? May the God of the Christians enable me to speak on these heads in a manner suitable to the importance of them!

SECTION I

1. I would consider, first, who is a Christian indeed? What does that term properly imply? It has been so long abused, I fear, not only to mean nothing at all, but what was far worse than nothing, to be a cloak for the vilest hypocrisy, for the grossest abominations and immoralities of every kind, that it is high time to rescue it out of the hands of wretches that are a reproach to human nature, to show determinately what manner of man he is to whom this name of right belongs.

2. A "Christian" cannot think of the Author of his being without abasing himself before him, without a deep sense of the distance between a worm of earth and him that "sitteth on the circle of the heavens" [*cf.* Is. 40:22]. In his presence he sinks into the dust, knowing himself to be less than nothing in his eye and being conscious, in a manner words cannot express, of his own littleness, ignorance, foolishness. So that he can only cry out, from the fulness of his heart, "O God, what is man? What am I?"

3. He has a continual sense of his dependence on the parent of good,¹ for his being and all the blessings that attend it. To him he refers every natural and every moral endowment, with all that is commonly ascribed either to fortune or to the wisdom, courage, or merit of the possessor. And hence he acquiesces in whatsoever appears to be his will, not only with patience but with thankfulness. He willingly resigns all he is, all he has, to his wise and gracious disposal. The ruling temper of his heart is the most absolute submission and the tenderest gratitude to his sovereign benefactor. And this grateful love creates filial fear, an awful reverence toward him and an earnest care not to give place to any disposition, not to admit an action, word or thought which might in any degree displease that indulgent power to whom he owes his life, breath and all things [*cf.* Acts 17:25].

4. And as he has the strongest affection for the fountain of all good, so he has the firmest confidence in him; a confidence which neither pleasure nor pain, neither life nor death, can shake. But yet this, far from creating sloth or indolence, pushes him on to the most vigorous industry. It causes him to put forth all his strength in obeying him in whom he confides; so that he is never faint in his mind, never weary of doing whatever he believes to be his will. And as he knows the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate him he worships, so he is continually labouring to transcribe into himself all his imitable perfections: in particular, his justice, mercy and truth, so eminently displayed in all his creatures.

5. Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbour: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works [*cf.* Ps. 145:9, B.C.P.]. It soars above all these scanty bounds, embracing neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies; yea, not only the good and gentle but also the froward; the evil and unthankful. For he loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, of whatever place or nation. And yet this universal benevolence does in nowise interfere with a peculiar regard for his relations, friends and benefactors, a fervent love for his country and the most endeared affection to all men of integrity, of clear and generous virtue.

6. His love to these, so to all mankind, is in itself generous and dis-

1. Cf. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. V, l. 153; see below, pp. 186, 388.

interested, springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise; no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter, not the parent, of his affection. By experience he knows that *social love* (if it mean the love of our neighbour) is absolutely, essentially different from *self-love*, even of the most allowable kind, just as different as the objects at which they point. And yet it is sure that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, 'till they mix together never to be divided.

7. And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness; of humanity, courtesy and affability. It makes a Christian rejoice in the virtues of all, and bear a part in their happiness at the same time that he sympathizes with their pains and compassionates their infirmities. It creates modesty, condescension, prudence—together with calmness and evenness of temper. It is the parent of generosity, openness and frankness, void of jealousy and suspicion. It begets candor and willingness to believe and hope whatever is kind and friendly of every man; and invincible patience, never overcome of evil, but overcoming evil with good [*cf.* Rom. 12:21].

8. The same love constrains him to converse, not only with a strict regard to truth but with artless sincerity and genuine simplicity, as one in whom there is no guile. And not content with abstaining from all such expressions as are contrary to justice or truth, he endeavours to refrain from every unloving word, either to a present or of an absent person; in all his conversation aiming at this, either to improve himself in knowledge or virtue, or to make those with whom he converses some way wiser, or better, or happier than they were before.

9. The same love is productive of all right actions. It leads him into an earnest and steady discharge of all social offices, of whatever is due to relations of every kind: to his friends, to his country and to any particular community whereof he is a member. It prevents his willingly hurting or grieving any man. It guides him into an uniform practice of justice and mercy, equally extensive with the principle whence it flows. It constrains him to do all possible good, of every possible kind, to all men; and makes him invariably resolved in every circumstance of life to do that, and that only, to others, which supposing he were himself in the same situation, he would desire they should do to him.

10. And as he is easy to others, so he is easy in himself. He is free from the painful swellings of pride, from the flames of anger, from the impetuous gusts of irregular self-will. He is no longer tortured with envy or malice, or with unreasonable and hurtful desire. He is no more

enslaved to the pleasures of sense, but has the full power both over his mind and body, in a continued cheerful course of sobriety, of temperance and chastity. He knows how to use all things in their place and yet is superior to them all. He stands above those low pleasures of imagination which captivate vulgar minds, whether arising from what mortals term greatness, or novelty or beauty. All these too he can taste and still look upward, still aspire to nobler enjoyments. Neither is he a slave to fame: popular breath affects not him; he stands steady and collected in himself.

11. And he who seeks no praise cannot fear dispraise. Censure gives him no uneasiness, being conscious to himself that he would not willingly offend and that he has the approbation of the Lord of all; He cannot fear want, knowing in whose hand is the earth and the fulness thereof and that it is impossible for him to withhold from one that fears him any manner of thing that is good. He cannot fear pain, knowing it will never be sent unless it be for his real advantage, and that then his strength will be proportioned to it, as it has always been in times past. He cannot fear death, being able to trust him he loves with his soul as well as his body, yea, glad to leave the corruptible body in the dust, 'till it is raised, incorruptible and immortal. So that, in honour or shame, in abundance or want, in ease or pain, in life or in death, always and in all things, he has learned to be content, to be easy, thankful, joyful, happy.

12. He is happy in knowing there is a God — an intelligent Cause and Lord of all — and that he is not the produce either of blind chance or inexorable necessity. He is happy in the full assurance he has, that this Creator and End of all things is a being of boundless wisdom, of infinite power to execute all the designs of his wisdom and of no less infinite goodness to direct all his power to the advantage of all his creatures. Nay, even the consideration of his immutable justice, rendering to all their due, of his unspotted holiness, of his all-sufficiency in himself and of that immense ocean of all perfections which center in God from eternity to eternity, is a continual addition to the happiness of a Christian.

13. A farther addition is made thereto while, in contemplating even the things that surround him, that thought strikes warmly upon his heart —

These are thy glorious works, Parent of Good! ²

while he takes knowledge of the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and wisdom in the things that are seen, the heavens, the earth,

2. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. V, l. 153; see above, p. 184, and below, p. 388.

the fowls of the air, the lilies of the field. How much more, while, rejoicing in the constant care which he still takes of the work of his own hand, he breaks out in a transport of love and praise, "O Lord our Governor! How excellent is thy Name in all the earth; thou that hast set thy glory above the heavens!" [Ps. 8:1, B.C.P.] — while he, as it were, sees the Lord sitting upon his throne and ruling all things well; while he observes the general providence of God co-extended with his whole creation and surveys all the effects of it in the heavens and earth, as a well-pleased spectator; while he sees the wisdom and goodness of his general government descending to every particular, so presiding over the whole universe as over a single person, so watching over every single person as if he were the whole universe — how does he exult when he reviews the various traces of the Almighty Goodness in what has befallen himself in the several circumstances and changes of his own life, all which he now sees have been allotted to him and dealt out in number, weight and measure. With what triumph of soul, in surveying either the general or particular providence of God, does he observe every line pointing out an hereafter, every scene opening into eternity?

14. He is peculiarly and inexpressibly happy in the clearest and fullest conviction: "This all-powerful, all-wise, all-gracious Being, this Governor of all, loves *me*. This lover of my soul is always with me, is never absent; no, not for a moment. And I love him: there is none in heaven but thee, none on earth that I desire beside thee [cf. Ps. 73:25]! And he has given me to resemble himself; he has stamped his image on my heart. And I live unto him; I do only his will; I glorify him with my body and my spirit. And it will not be long before I shall die unto him, I shall die into the arms of God. And then farewell sin and pain, then it only remains that I should live with him for ever."

15. This is the plain, naked portraiture of a Christian. But be not prejudiced against him for his name. Forgive his particularities of opinion and (what you think) superstitious modes of worship. These are circumstances but of small concern and do not enter into the essence of his character. Cover them with a veil of love and look at the substance: his tempers, his holiness, his happiness. Can calm reason conceive either a more amiable or a more desirable character?

Is it your own? Away with names! Away with opinions! I care not what you are called. I ask not (it does not deserve a thought) what opinion you are of, so you are conscious to yourself that you are the man whom I have been (however faintly) describing.

Do not you know you ought to be such? Is the Governor of the world well pleased that you are not?

Do you at least desire it? I would to God that desire may penetrate your inmost soul and that you may have no rest in your spirit 'till you are not only almost but altogether a Christian! ³

SECTION II

1. The second point to be considered is what is real, genuine Christianity — whether we speak of it as a principle in the soul or as a scheme or system of doctrine?

Christianity, taken in the latter sense, is that system of doctrine which describes the character above recited, which promises it shall be mine (provided I will not rest till I attain) and which tells me how I may attain it.

2. First, it *describes* this character in all its parts, and that in the most lively and affecting manner. The main lines of this picture are beautifully drawn in many passages of the Old Testament. These are filled up in the New, retouched and finished with all the art of God.

The same we have in miniature more than once; particularly in the thirteenth chapter of the former Epistle to the Corinthians, and in that discourse which St. Matthew records as delivered by our Lord at his entrance upon his public ministry.

3. Secondly, Christianity *promises* this character shall be mine if I will not rest till I attain it. This is promised both in the Old Testament and the New. Indeed the New is, in effect, all a promise, seeing every description of the servants of God mentioned therein has the nature of a command; in consequence of those general injunctions: "Be ye followers of me, as I am of Christ"; ⁴ "be ye followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises." ⁵ And every command has the force of a promise, in virtue of those general promises: "A new heart will I give you, and I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." ⁶ "This is the covenant that I will make after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their minds and write them in their hearts." ⁷ Accordingly, when it is said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," ⁸ it is not only a

3. Cf. "The Almost Christian," *Sermons* (Sugden), I, 53-67.

4. [Au.] 1 Cor. 11:1.

5. [Au.] Heb. 6:12.

6. [Au.] Ezek. 36:26-27.

7. [Au.] Heb. 8:10.

8. [Au.] Mt. 22:37.

direction what I shall do, but a promise of what God will do in me, exactly equivalent with what is written elsewhere: "The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed" (alluding to the custom then in use) "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul." ⁹

4. This being observed, it will readily appear to every serious person who reads the New Testament with that care which the importance of the subject demands that every particular branch of the preceding character is manifestly promised therein, either explicitly, under the very form of a promise, or virtually, under that of a description or command.

5. Christianity tells me, in the third place, how I may attain the promise, namely, by faith.

But what is faith? Not an opinion, no more than it is a form of words; not any number of opinions put together, be they ever so true. A string of opinions is no more Christian faith than a string of beads is Christian holiness.

It is not an assent to any opinion, or any number of opinions. A man may assent to three or three-and-twenty creeds; he may assent to all the Old and New Testament (at least, as far as he understands them) and yet have no Christian faith at all.

6. The faith by which the promise is attained is represented by Christianity as a power wrought by the Almighty in an immortal spirit inhabiting an house of clay, to see through that veil into the world of spirits, into things invisible and eternal; a power to discern those things which with eyes of flesh and blood no man hath seen or can see, either by reason of their nature, which (though they surround us on every side) is [are?] not perceivable by these gross senses, or by reason of their distance, as being yet afar off in the bosom of eternity. ¹⁰

7. This is Christian faith in the general notion of it. In its more particular notion, it is a divine evidence or conviction wrought in my heart that God is reconciled to me through his Son, inseparably joined with a confidence in him as a gracious, reconciled Father, as for all things, so especially for all those good things which are invisible and eternal. ¹¹

9. [Au.] Deut. 30:6.

10. Cf. this analogy between physical and spiritual sensation with *An Earnest Appeal*, below, p. 386 ff.

11. Cf. "Justification by Faith," below, p. 204 ff. See also "The Scripture Way of Salvation," below, p. 275 ff.; and *The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith and Good Works*, above, p. 125 f.

To believe (in the Christian sense) is, then, to walk in the light of eternity and to have a clear sight of, and confidence in, the Most High, reconciled to me through the Son of his love.

8. Now, how highly desirable is such a faith, were it only on its own account? For how little does the wisest of men know of anything more than he can see with his eyes? What clouds and darkness cover the whole scene of things invisible and eternal? What does he know even of himself as to his invisible part, what of his future manner of existence? How melancholy an account does the prying, learned philosopher (perhaps the wisest and best of all heathens), the great, the venerable Marcus [Aurelius] Antoninus,¹² give of these things? What was the result of all his serious researches, of his high and deep contemplations? "Either dissipation (of the soul as well as the body) into the common, unthinking mass or reabsorption into the universal fire (the unintelligent source of all things) or some unknown manner of conscious existence, after the body sinks to rise no more." One of these three he supposed must succeed death; but which, he had no light to determine. Poor Antoninus — with all his wealth, his honour, his power, with all his wisdom and philosophy!

What points of knowledge did he gain?
That life is sacred all — and vain!
Sacred how high, and vain how low?
He could not tell — but died to know.¹³

9. He died to know! And so must you, unless you are now a partaker of Christian faith. O consider this! Nay, and consider, not only how little you know of the immensity of the things that are beyond sense and time, but how uncertainly do you know even that little! How faintly glimmering a light is that you have? Can you properly be said to *know* any of these things? Is that knowledge any more than bare conjecture? And the reason is plain. You have no senses suited to invisible or eternal objects. What *desiderata* then, especially to the rational, the reflecting part of mankind, are these: a more extensive knowledge of things invisible and eternal, a greater certainty in whatever knowledge of them we have, and, in order to both, faculties capable of discerning things invisible?

12. Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher (121–180) whose *Meditations* Wesley read (or reread?) in October 1745; cf. *Journal*, III, 215.

13. Cf. John Gambold (member of the Oxford Holy Club; rector of Stanton Harcourt), *Works* (Bath, 1789), 276, where the last line reads: "He knew not here — but died to know."

10. Is it not so? Let impartial reason speak. Does not every thinking man want a window, not so much in his neighbour's as in his own breast? He wants an opening there of whatever kind that might let in light from eternity. He is pained to be thus feeling after God so darkly, so uncertainly; to know so little of God and indeed so little of any beside material objects. He is concerned that he must see even that little, not directly, but in the dim, sullied glass of sense and, consequently, so imperfectly and obscurely that 'tis all a mere enigma still.

11. Now, these very *desiderata* faith supplies. It gives a more extensive knowledge of things invisible, showing what eye had not seen, nor ear heard, neither could it before enter into our heart to conceive. And all these it shows in the clearest light, with the fullest certainty and evidence (*ἔλεγχος*). For it does not leave us to receive our notices of them by mere reflection from the dull glass of sense, but resolves a thousand enigmas of the highest concern by giving faculties suited to things invisible. O who would not wish for such a faith, were it only on these accounts? How much more, if by this I may receive the promise, I may attain all that holiness and happiness?

12. So Christianity tells me and so I find it. May every real Christian say, "I now am assured that these things are so; I experienced them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised, is accomplished in my soul." And Christianity, considered as an inward principle, is the completion of all those promises. It is holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed on a created spirit, a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.

SECTION III

1. And this I conceive to be the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity. I do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind and in its degree. And yet I cannot set it on a level with this.

It is generally supposed that traditional evidence is weakened by length of time, as it must necessarily pass through so many hands in a continued succession of ages. But no length of time can possibly affect the strength of this internal evidence. It is equally strong, equally new, through the course of seventeen hundred years. It passes now, even as it has done from the beginning, directly from God into the believing soul. Do you suppose time will ever dry up this stream? O, no! It shall never be cut off.

*Labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum*¹⁴

2. Traditional evidence is of an extremely complicated nature, necessarily including so many and so various considerations that only men of strong and clear understanding can be sensible of its full force. On the contrary, how plain and simple is this and how level to the lowest capacity? Is not this the sum: "One thing I know; I was blind, but now I see" [cf. Jn. 9:25]? — an argument so plain that a peasant, a woman, a child, may feel all its force.

3. The traditional evidence of Christianity stands, as it were, a great way off, and therefore, although it speaks loud and clear, yet makes a less lively impression. It gives us an account of what was transacted long ago, in far distant times as well as places, whereas the inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times and in all places. It is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart [cf. Deut. 30:14; Rom. 10:8], if thou believest in the Lord Jesus Christ. "This," then, "is the record," this is the evidence, emphatically so called, "that God hath given unto us eternal life and this life is in his Son" [1 Jn. 5:11].

4. If, then, it were possible (which I conceive it is not) to shake the traditional evidence of Christianity, still he that has the internal evidence (and every true believer hath the witness or evidence in himself) would stand firm and unshaken. Still he could say to those who were striking at the external evidence, "Beat on the sack of Anaxagoras,"¹⁵ but you can no more hurt *my* evidence of Christianity than the tyrant could hurt the spirit of that wise man.

5. I have sometimes been almost inclined to believe that the wisdom of God has, in most later ages, permitted the external evidence of Christianity to be more or less clogged and encumbered for this very end, that men (of reflection especially) might not altogether rest there, but be constrained to look into themselves also and attend to the light shining in their hearts.

Nay, it seems (if it may be allowed for us to pry so far into the rea-

14. "It flows and goes on flowing through all the circling years." Cf. Horace, *Epistles*, Bk. I, Epistle ii, l. 43; Wesley quotes it again, *Letters*, II, 384.

15. Wesley's point here is obvious enough, but his citation is not, nor does it fit the records we have of the life and sayings of Anaxagoras. If, however, we read "Epictetus," we would have abundant documentation for the idea, if not the actual aphorism; cf. *Discourses*, Bk. I, chap. xix (Loeb ed. [Cambridge, Mass., 1946], I, 128-35); Bk. III, chap. vi (*ibid.*, II, 46-47); chap. x (*ibid.*, 76-77); Bk. IV, chap. i (*ibid.*, 295-99); *Fragments*, sec. 23 (Loeb ed., II, 466-67), and sec. 26 (470-71); and *Manual*, sec. 20 (Loeb ed., II, 498-99).

sons of the divine dispensations) that, particularly in this age, God suffers all kind of objections to be raised against the traditional evidence of Christianity that men of understanding (though unwilling to give it up, yet, at the same time they defend this evidence) may not rest the whole strength of their cause thereon but seek a deeper and firmer support for it.

6. Without this, I cannot but doubt whether they can long maintain their cause; whether, if they do not obey the loud call of God and lay far more stress than they have hitherto done on this internal evidence of Christianity, they will not, one after another, give up the external, and (in heart at least) go over to those whom they are now contending with; so that, in a century or two, the people of England will be fairly divided into real deists and real Christians. And I apprehend this would be no loss at all, but rather an advantage to the Christian cause. Nay, perhaps it would be the speediest, yea, the only effectual way of bringing all reasonable deists to be Christians.

7. May I be permitted to speak freely? May I, without offence, ask of you that are called Christians what real loss would you sustain in giving up your present opinion that the Christian system is of God? Though you bear the name, you are not Christians now: you have neither Christian faith nor love. You have no divine evidence of things unseen, you have not entered "into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" [cf. Heb. 10:19]. You do not love God with all your heart; neither do you love your neighbour as yourself. You are neither happy nor holy. You have not learned in every state therewith to be content: to rejoice evermore, even in want, pain, death and in everything to give thanks. You are not holy in heart: superior to pride, to anger, to foolish desires. Neither are you holy in life; you do not walk as Christ also walked. Does not the main of your Christianity lie in your opinion, decked with a few outward observances? For as to morality, even honest heathen morality — O let me utter a melancholy truth! — many of those whom you style deists, there is reason to fear, have far more of it than you.

8. Go on, gentlemen, and prosper! Shame these nominal Christians out of that poor superstition which they call Christianity. Reason, rally, laugh them out of their dead, empty forms, void of spirit, of faith, of love. Convince them that such unmeaning pageantry — for such it manifestly is if there is nothing in the heart correspondent with the outward show — is absolutely unworthy, you need not say of God, but even of any man that is endued with common understanding. Show them that while they are endeavouring to please God thus, they are only beating the

air. Know your time; press on; push your victories 'till you have conquered all that know not God. And then he, whom neither they nor you know now, shall rise and gird himself with strength and go forth in his almighty love, and sweetly conquer you all together.

9. O that the time were come! How do I long for you to be partakers of the exceeding great and precious promises! How am I pained when I hear any of you using those silly terms which the men of form have taught you: calling the mention of the only thing you want "cant"; the deepest wisdom, the highest happiness, "enthusiasm"! What ignorance is this? How extremely despicable would it make you in the eyes of any but a Christian? But he cannot despise you, who loves you as his own soul, who is ready to lay down his life for your sake.

10. Perhaps you will say, "But this internal evidence of Christianity affects only those in whom the promise is fulfilled. It is no evidence to *me*." There is truth in this objection. It does affect them chiefly, but it does not affect them only. It cannot, in the nature of things, be so strong an evidence to others as it is to them. And yet it may bring a degree of evidence. It may reflect some light on you also.

For, first, you see the beauty and loveliness of Christianity, when it is rightly understood, and you are sure there is nothing to be desired in comparison of it.

Secondly, you know the Scripture promises this and says it is attained by faith, and by no other way.

Thirdly, you see clearly how desirable Christian faith is, even on account of its own intrinsic value.

Fourthly, you are a witness that the holiness and happiness above described can be attained no other way. The more you have laboured after virtue and happiness, the more convinced you are of this. Thus far, then, you need not lean upon other men; thus far you have personal experience.

Fifthly, what reasonable assurance can you have of things whereof you have not personal experience? Suppose the question were, can the blind be restored to sight? This you have not yourself experienced. How then will you know that such a thing ever was? Can there be an easier or surer way than to talk with one or some number of men who were blind but are now restored to sight? They cannot be deceived as to the fact in question; the nature of the thing leaves no room for this. And if they are honest men (which you may learn from other circumstances), they will not deceive you.

Now transfer this to the case before us. And those who were blind, but now see — those who were sick many years, but now are healed; those who were miserable, but now are happy — will afford *you* also a very strong evidence of the truth of Christianity; as strong as can be in the nature of things 'till you experience it in your own soul. And this, though it be allowed they are but plain men, and, in general, of weak understanding; nay, though some of them should be mistaken in other points and hold opinions which cannot be defended.¹⁶

11. All this may [also] be allowed concerning the primitive Fathers. I mean particularly Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, Cyprian; to whom I would add Macarius and Ephraem Syrus.¹⁷

I allow that some of these had not strong natural sense, that few of them had much learning, and none the assistances which our age enjoys in some respects above all that went before.

Hence I doubt not but whoever will be at the pains of reading over their writings for that poor end will find many mistakes, many weak suppositions, and many ill-drawn conclusions.

12. And yet I exceedingly reverence them, as well as their writings, and esteem them very highly in love. I reverence them, because they were Christians, such Christians as are above described. And I reverence their writings, because they describe true, genuine Christianity, and direct us to the strongest evidence of the Christian doctrine.

Indeed, in addressing the heathens of those times, they intermix other arguments — particularly, that drawn from the numerous miracles which were then performed in the church, which they needed only to open their eyes and see daily wrought in the face of the sun.

But still they never relinquish this: "What the Scripture promises, I enjoy. Come and see what Christianity has done here; and acknowledge it is of God."

I reverence these ancient Christians (with all their failings) the more, because I see so few Christians now; because I read so little in the writings of later times, and hear so little, of genuine Christianity; and because most of the modern Christians (so called), not content with be-

16. The separate text of *A Plain Account* . . . ends here. The added sections form the conclusion of the "Letter" to Dr. Middleton; see above, p. 181 f. and *Works*, X, 79.

17. See above, p. 9 f.

ing wholly ignorant of it, are deeply prejudiced against it, calling it "enthusiasm," and I know not what.

That the God of power and love may make both them, and you, and me, such Christians as those Fathers were, is the earnest prayer of,
Reverend Sir,

Your real friend and servant,