

On Corrupting the Word of God

by John Wesley (1728)

"We are not as many, who corrupt the word of God: But as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ." - 2 Cor. 2:17.

Many have observed, that nothing conduces more to a Preacher's success with those that hear him, than a general good opinion of his sincerity. Nothing gives him a greater force of persuasion than this; nothing creates either a greater attention in the hearers or a greater disposition to improve. When they really believe he has no end in speaking, but what he fairly carries in view, and that he is willing that they should see all the steps he takes for the attainment of that end, -- it must give them a strong presumption, both that what he seeks is good, and the method in which he seeks it.

But how to possess them with this belief is the question. How shall we bring them to take notice of our sincerity, if they do not advert to it of themselves? One good way, however common, is, frankly and openly to profess it. There is something in these professions, when they come from the heart, strongly insinuating into the hearts of others. The persons of any generosity that hear them find themselves almost forced to believe them; and even those who believe them not are obliged in prudence, not to let their incredulity appear, since it is a known rule, -- the honester any man is, the less apt is he to suspect another. The consequence whereof is plain: Whoever without proof, is suspicious of his neighbour's sincerity, gives a probable proof that he judges of his heart from the falseness of his own.

Would not any man be tempted to suspect his integrity, who, without proof, suspected the want of it in another, that had fairly and openly professed the principles on which he acted? Surely none, but who himself corrupted the word of God, or wished that it were corrupted, could lightly suspect either St. Paul of doing it, or any that after him should use his generous declaration: "We are not as many, who corrupt the word of God: But as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ."

Not that the Apostle, any more than his followers in preaching the gospel, desires they should wholly rely on his words; for afterwards he appeals to his actions to confirm them. And those who in this can imitate him need not entreat men to believe their sincerity. If our works bear the stamp of it, as well as our words, both together will speak so loudly and plainly, every unprejudiced person must understand that we speak in Christ, as in sincerity, and that in so doing we consider we are in the sight of that God whose commission we bear.

Those whom the Apostle accuses of the contrary practice, of corrupting the word of God, seem to have been Jews, who owning Jesus to be Christ, and his gospel to be divine, yet adulterated it, by intermingling with it the law of Moses, and their own traditions. And in doing this, their principal view was to make a gain of Christ; which, consequently, laid them under a necessity of concealing the end they proposed, as well as the means they used to obtain it. On the contrary, those who intend the good of mankind, are by no means concerned to hide their intentions. If the benefit we propose in speaking be to ourselves, it is often our interest to keep it private. If the benefit we propose be to others, it is always our interest to make it public; and it is the interest both of ourselves and others, to make public those marks of distinction whence may clearly be known who corrupt the word of God, and who preach it in sincerity.

I. The First and great mark of one who corrupts the word of God, is, introducing into it human mixtures; either the errors [heresies] of others, or the fancies of his own brain. To do this, is to corrupt it in the highest degree; to blend with the oracles of God, impure dreams, fit only for the mouth of the devil! And yet it has been so frequently done, that scarce ever was any erroneous [heretical] opinion either invented or received, but Scripture was quoted to defend it.

And when the imposture was too bare-faced, and the text cited for it appeared too plainly either to make against it, or to be nothing to the purpose, then recourse has usually been had to a Second method of corrupting it, by mixing it with false interpretations. And this is done, sometimes by repeating the words wrong; and sometimes by repeating them right, but putting a wrong sense upon them; one that is either strained and unnatural, or foreign to the writer's intention in the place from whence they are taken; perhaps contrary either to his intention in that very place, or to what he says in some other part of his writings. And this is easily effected: Any passage is easily perverted, by being recited singly, without any of the preceding or following verses. By this means it may often seem to have one sense, when it will be plain, by observing what goes before and what follows after, that it really has the direct contrary: For want of observing which, unwary souls are liable to be tossed about with every wind of doctrine, whenever they fall into the hand of those who have enough of wickedness and cunning, thus to adulterate what they preach, and to add now and then a plausible comment to make it go down the more easily.

A third sort of those who corrupt the Word of God, though in a lower degree than either of the former, are those who do so, not by adding to it, but taking from it; who take either of the spirit or substance of it away, while they study to prophesy only smooth things, and therefore palliate and colour what they preach, to reconcile it to the taste of the hearers. And that they may do this the better, they commonly let those parts go that will admit of no colouring. They wash their hands of those stubborn texts that will not bend to their purpose, or that too plainly touch on the reigning vices of the place where they are. These they exchange for those more soft and tractable ones, that are not so apt to give offence. Not one word must be said of the tribulation and anguish denounced against sinners in general; much less of the unquenchable fire, which, if God be true, awaits several of those particular offences that have fallen within their own notice. These tender parts are not to be touched without danger by them who study to recommend themselves to men; or, if they are, it must be with the utmost caution, and a nice evasion in reserve. But they safely may thunder against those who are out of their reach, and against those sins which they suppose none that hear them are guilty of. No one takes it to heart, to hear those practices laid open which he is not concerned in himself. But when the stroke comes home, when it reaches his own case, then is he, if not convinced, displeased, or angry, and out of patience.

These are the methods of those corrupters of the word, who act in the sight of men, not of God. He trieth the hearts, and will receive no service in which the lips only are concerned. But their words have no intercourse with their thoughts. Nor is it proper for them that they should. For if their real intention once appeared, it must make itself unsuccessful. They purpose, it is true, to do good by the gospel of Christ; but it is to themselves, not to others. Whereas they that use sincerity in preaching the gospel, in the good of others seek their own. And that they are sincere, and speak as commissioned officers, in the sight of Him whose commission they bear, plainly appears from the direct contrariety between their practice, and that of the dissemblers above described.

II. First. Consider, it is not their own word they preach, but the word of Him that sent them. They preach it genuine and unmixed. As they do not only profess, but really believe, that, "if any man add unto the word of God, He will add unto him all the plagues that are written in it," they are fearful of doing it in the least instance. You have the gospel from them, if in a less elegant manner, yet fair, and as it is; without any mixture of errors [heresy] to pollute it, or misinterpretation to perplex it; explained in the most natural, obvious manner, by what precedes and what follows the place in question; and commented on by the most sure way, the least liable to mistake or corruption, the producing of those parallel places that express the same thing the more plainly.

In the next place, they are as cautious of taking from, as of adding to, the word they preach. They dare no more, considering in whose sight they stand, say less, than [or] more, than He has assigned them. They must publish, as proper occasions offer, all that is contained in the oracles of God; whether smooth or otherwise, it matters nothing, since it is unquestionably true, and useful too: "For all Scripture is given by inspiration of God; and is profitable either for doctrine, or reproof, or correction, or instruction in righteousness," -- either to teach us what we are to believe or practise, or for conviction of error, reformation of vice. They know that there is nothing superfluous in it, relating either to faith or practice; and therefore they preach all parts of it, though those more frequently and particularly which are more particularly wanted where they are. They are so far from abstaining to

speak against any vice because it is fashionable and in repute in the place Providence has allotted them; but for that very reason they are more zealous in testifying against it. They are so far from abstaining from speaking for any virtue because it is unfashionable and in disrepute where they are placed, that they therefore the more vigorously recommend it.

Lastly. They who speak in sincerity, and as in the sight of Him who deposes them, show that they do so, by the manner in which they speak. They speak with plainness and boldness, and are not concerned to palliate their doctrine, to reconcile it to the tastes of men. They endeavour to set it always in a true light, whether it be a pleasing one or not. They will not, they dare not, soften a threatening, so as to prejudice its strength, neither represent sin in such mild colours as to impair its native blackness. Not that they do not choose mildness, when it is likely to be effectual. Though they know "the terrors of the Lord," they desire rather to "persuade men." This method they use, and love to use it, with such as are capable of persuasion. With such as are not, they are obliged, if they will be faithful, to take the severer course. Let the revilers look to that; it harms not them: and if they are blamed or reviled for so doing, let the revilers look to that: Let the hearers accommodate themselves to the word; the word is not, in this sense, to be accommodated to the hearers. The Preacher of it would be no less in fault, in a slavish obsequiousness on one side, than in an unrelenting sternness on the other.

III. If, then, we have spoken the word of God, the genuine unmixed word of God, and that only; if we have put no unnatural interpretation upon it, but [have] taken the known phrases in their common, obvious sense, -- and when they were less known, explained scripture by scripture; if we have spoken the whole word, as occasion offered, though rather the parts which seemed most proper to give a check to some fashionable vice, or to encourage the practice of some unfashionable virtue; and if we have done this plainly and boldly, though with all the mildness and gentleness that the nature of the subject will bear; -- then, believe ye our works, if not our words; or rather, believe them both together. Here is all a Preacher can do; all the evidence that he either can or need give of his good intentions. There is no way but this to show he speaks as of sincerity, as commissioned by the Lord, and as in his sight. If there be any who, after all this, will not believe that it is his concern, not our own, we labour for; that our first intention in speaking, is to point him the way to happiness, and to disengage him from the great road that leads to misery; we are clear of the blood of that man; -- it rests on his own head. For thus saith the Lord, who hath set us as watchmen over the souls of our countrymen and brethren: "If thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it;" -- much more if we use all methods possible to convince him that the warning is of God; -- "if he do not turn from his way," -- which certainly he will not, if he do not believe that we are in earnest, -- "he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thine own soul."