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CHRISTIANITY A BATTLE,

NOT A DREAM.

A DISCOURSE BY MR. WENDELL PHILLIPS,

OF BOSTON,

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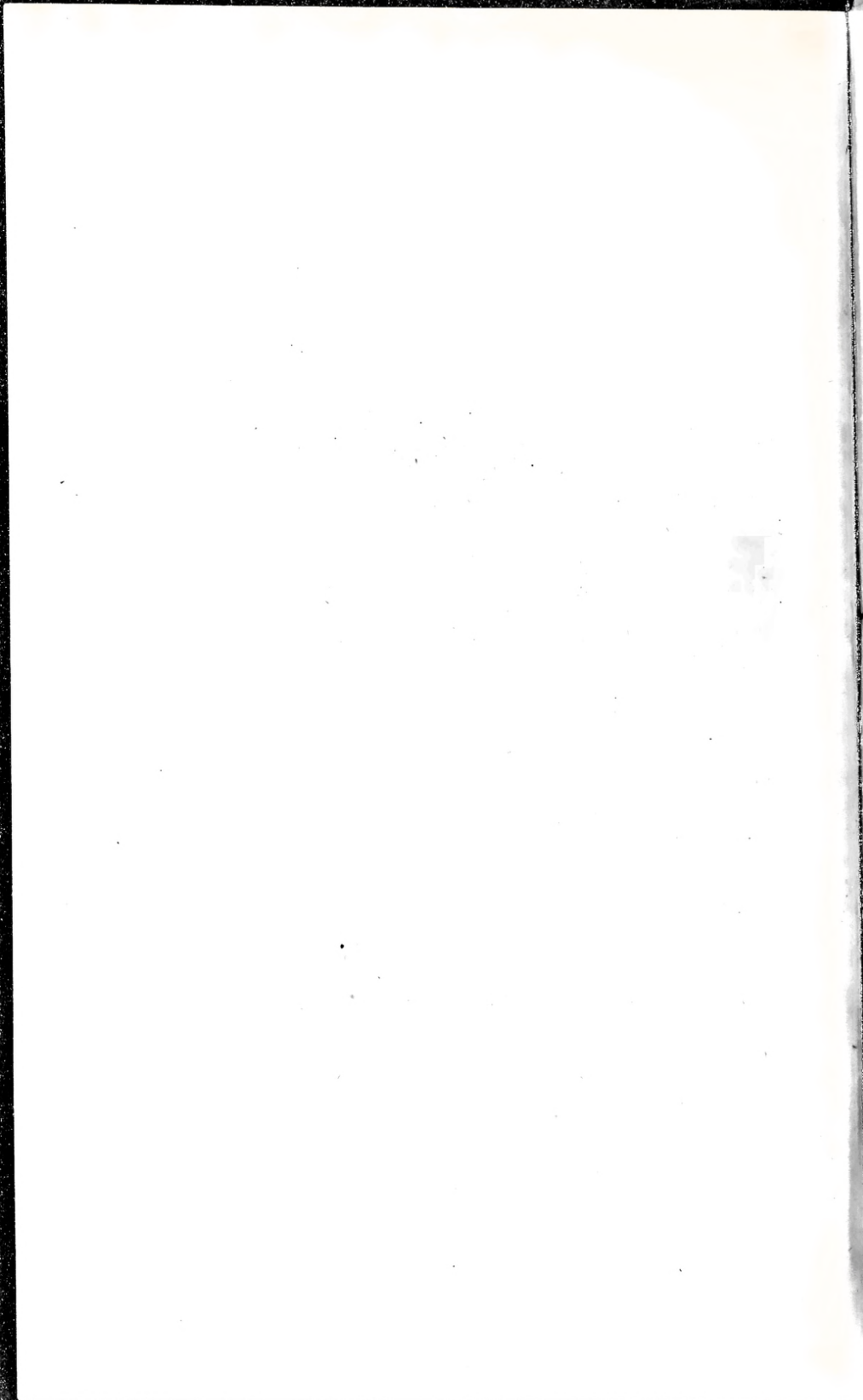
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P R E F A C E .

IT has been frequently remarked by many whose wisdom cannot be doubted, that as Christianity exists one must make the most of it. It is not for us to depict how it has passed through the earth and been polluted. How we can make the most of it as it at present exists is our task; and as a sample of an effort towards it I beg to place before the public this present discourse of Mr. Wendell Phillips.

W. F. C. S.

Lausanne, September, 1869.



“CHRISTIANITY A BATTLE, NOT A DREAM.”

To tell the truth, the subject is one not very familiar to my beaten path of thought, and I am present rather at the urgency of the committee to take a share in the discussion of the topics for which the doors were opened, than from any earnest wish of my own. But still I should be ashamed to say, after having lived thirty years of active life in a community stirred as ours has been, that I have not some suggestions to offer on a topic so vital as the one now before me. Every man who has lived thoughtfully in the midst of the great issues that have been struggling for attention and settlement, every man who has striven to rouse to action the elemental forces of society and civilization which ought to grapple with these problems, must have had his thoughts turned often, constantly, to the nature of Christianity itself, and to the place which it ought to hold, compared to that which it really occupies, amid the great elements which are to mould our future.

There is a great deal of talk about Christianity as the mere reflection of the morals and intellect of the passing age; as something which may be made to take any form, assume any principle, or direct itself against any point at the bidding of the spirit of the current time. It is looked upon as an ephemeral result, not as a permanent cause; and when viewed as such, men very naturally class it with the other religions of the world, which have all been results, not causes—effects, not sources of action. As I look at Christianity in its relation to absolute religion—religion, the science of duty to ourselves, to our fellows, and to God—as I look at Christianity in reference to religion, I want to say at the outset that it, for me, occupies an entirely distinct place, an entirely

different level from any other of what are called or have been known as the religions of the world.

If you go to the East, for the last three thousand years you find a religion the reflection of its civilization; the outgrowth of its thought; steeped in its animal life; dragged down by all its animal temptations; rotted through with license, cruelty, and with all that grows out of the abnormal relation of the body to the soul. And the only distinctive element in this outburst of Hindoo religions, Buddha and Brahma too, the only redeeming point, is a sort of exceptional intellectual life, which busied itself exclusively with the future; which struggled to plan and shape life, and mould it on the principle that to be like God you were to trample out all human affection and interests, thought, duties, and relations; and the moment you became utterly passionless, thoughtless, without interest in aught external, you were God-like—absorbed into the Infinite, and ready for the hereafter.

The only thing remarkable in these Asiatic religions is that they were infinitely below the popular level of morality and intelligence, while the intellectual conception in them busied itself with nothing but the future state; not in one single thought, or effort, or plan, or method, with man as God places him on the surface of this planet. And it was a religion so much the actual result of the moral and intellectual life, so moonlike a reflection, that in due time, after a century or two, society in Hindostan was infinitely better than its religion. I know, of course, of the bright gems of thought that glisten here and there on Hindoo sacred pages; interpolated nobody can possibly say when; but, whether so or not, they are exceptions to the broad, popular estimate of the religion of the age. That was in itself so weak, so poor, so immoral, so degraded, so animal, that any social system in Hindostan which had not been better than its gods would have rotted out from inherent corruption. I utterly and indignantly repudiate the supposition that in any sense Christianity is to be grouped with the religious demonstrations of Asia.

If you cross the Straits and come to the fair humanities of ancient Greece, to the classic mythology which gave us the civilization of Greece, the same general truth obtains. The mythology of the age was so literally and utterly a mere reflex of its earliest

civilization, that the finest specimens of human life find no prototype for the nobleness of Socrates or the integrity of Cato? If Athens and Rome had not been far better than Olympus, neither empire would have survived long enough to have given us Phocion, Demosthenes, or Cato.

Religion is the soul, of which society and civil polity are the body, and when you bring forward the exceptional lives of thoughtful men, living either in Greece or on the banks of the Ganges, as a measure of the religion of their age and country, I reject it; for I go out into the streets of both continents to ask what is the broad result (grouping a dozen centuries together) of the great religious force which always, in some form or other, underlies every social development; and when I seek it either in Greece, or Asia, or Mahomet, I find a civilization of caste, exclusively a civilization of animal supremacy—a civilization in itself natural, not wholly useless, but superficial, grovelling and short-lived.

In a world covered over with this religious experience, out of a world lying in murky ignorance—except where one or two points like Athens and some old cities of Asia towered out of it by an intellectual life—all at once there started up a system which we call Christianity; the outgrowth of the narrowest, and, as the world supposed, the most degraded tribe of human beings that occupied its surface. I am not going to touch on its doctrines, because I do not believe that it has many doctrines. I do not believe that out of the New Testament you can, by any torture of ingenuity, make a creed. I do not believe that the New Testament writers intended you should make a creed. The sneer of the infidel is that you may get anything out of the New Testament. It is like a napkin in the hands of a juggler. It can be made to assume many shapes—church tower, rabbit's head, baby's cradle—but it is a napkin still. When you torture the New Testament into Calvinism, or Romanism, or Catholicism, or Universalism, or Unitarianism, it is nothing but the New Testament after all.

There are certain great principles inherent in Christianity, as a religious and an intellectual movement, that distinguish it from all others, judging in two ways—either by the fair current of its records, or by the fruit of its existence. There are two ways of judging Christianity: one to open its records, and the other to

trace Europe and its history under the influence of Christianity. I wish to call attention to two or three principles of Christianity which are not included in any other religious system, and the first is the principle of sacrifice. "Bear ye one another's burdens" is the cardinal principle that underlies Christianity. All other religions allow that the strong have the right to use the weak. Like Darwin's principle of philosophy, the best, the strongest, the educated, the powerful, have the right to have the world to themselves, and to absorb the less privileged in their enjoyable career. Carlyle represents that element in modern literature. Christianity ignores it in its central principle. Wealth, health, and knowledge are a trust. "If any man be chief among you let him be your servant." If you know anything communicate it. Whatever you hold it is not yours. See that you make yourself the servant of the weakness of your age.

God in his providence, to which Christ gave us the key, is the mover of the ages, and has always been dragging down the great and lifting up the poor; and Christianity was the first testimony of religion which recognised the decree of Providence that the greater is the servant of the lesser.

Again, Christianity endeavours to reform the world by ideas. There is not such another attempt in the history of the race. There is nowhere a single religious leader that ever said, "I will re-model the world, and I will re-model it by thought." Christianity not only trusts itself to the mind, to the supremacy of the soul, but it is *aggressive* on that line. It not only says, with every thoughtful man, the mind is stronger than the body, but the Saviour says, "Go out and preach the gospel to every creature." The great AGITATOR of the centuries is Jesus Christ of Jerusalem, who undertook to found his power on an idea, and at the same time to announce his faith and to teach his disciples "This idea shall re-mould the world." No other religion has attempted it; no other religious leader has proclaimed any such purpose, plan, or faith.

Christianity has another element that distinguishes it from all religions. It does not appeal to education; it does not appeal to caste; it does not appeal to culture and the disciplined mind—in this century or any other. To the poor the gospel is preached. Christianity did not condescend to the lowest ignorance; it selected

the lowest ignorance as the depository of its trust. Some one has said, "Christianity is the highest wisdom condescending to the lowest ignorance." That is an insufficient statement. Christ *entrusted* his gospel to the poor—to the common sense of the race—to the instincts of human nature. He turned away from sanhedrim and school; from Pharisee, who represented observance, and Sadducee, who personated sceptical inquiry, and called to his side the unlearned; planted the seeds of his empire in the masses; no caste, no college, no "inside" clique of adepts, and no "outside" herd of dupes. Christ proclaims spiritual equality and brotherhood.

You see in the Bible that the Saviour was considered a babler, a disorganiser, a pestilent fellow, a stirrer-up of sedition. All the names that have been bestowed on men that ever came to turn the world upside down were heaped upon that leader of Christianity in the streets of Jerusalem. If he should come to-day into these streets as he stood up in the corners of the streets of Jerusalem and arraigned the church and state of his day, he would be denied and crucified exactly as he was in the streets of Jerusalem 1800 years ago. This is a most singular and unique characteristic of Christianity. It did not affect the schools; did not ask the endorsement of the Academy of Plato; it went to the people; it trusted the human race. It said, "I am as immortal as man. I accept human nature, and the evidence of my divinity will be that every successive development of a fact of human nature will come back here and find its key." Christianity says, "I leave my record with the instincts of the race. The accumulating evidence of my divine mission shall be that nowhere can the race travel, under no climate, in the midst of no circumstances can it develop anything, of which I have not offered beforehand the explanation and the key."

The fourth element peculiar to Christianity is its ideal of woman. In all civilization, as in every individual case—in all times, as well as in all men—this rule holds. The level of a man's spiritual life, and the spiritual life of an age, is exactly this—its ideal of a woman. No matter where you test society, what is its intellectual or moral development, the idea that it has held of woman is the measure and the test of the progress it has made. The black woman in the South holds in her hands to-day the social recon-

struction of half the Union. The black man of the South holds its material and its industrial future. Its spiritual and moral possibility lies in the place which woman shall compel her fellow-beings to accord her in their ideas of the future. So wherever you go—into Asia or Greece—the idea that each religion held of woman is a test of its absolute spiritual truth and life. Christianity is the only religion that ever accorded to woman her true place in the Providence of God. It was exceptional; it was antagonistic to the whole spirit of the age. The elements I have named are those which distinguish Christianity.

Is Christianity an inspired faith or not? Shakespeare and Plato tower above the intellectual level of their times like the peaks of Teneriffe and Mont Blanc. We look at them, and it seems impossible to measure the interval that separates them from the intellectual development around them. But if this Jewish boy in that era of the world, in Palestine, with the Ganges on one side of him and the Olympus of Athens on the other, ever produced a religion with these four elements, he towers so far above Shakespeare and Plato that the difference between Shakespeare and Plato and their times in the comparison becomes an imperceptible wrinkle on the surface of the earth. I think it a greater credulity to believe that there ever was a man so much superior to Athens and to England as this Jewish youth was, if he was a mere man, than it is to believe that in the fulness of time a higher wisdom than was ever vouchsafed to a human being undertook to tell the human race the secret by which it could lift itself to a higher plane of moral and intellectual existence. I have weighed Christianity as the great vital and elemental force which underlies Europe, to which we are indebted for European civilization. I have endeavoured to measure its strength, to estimate its permanence, to analyse its elements; and if they ever came from the unassisted brain of one uneducated Jew, while Shakespeare is admirable, and Plato is admirable, and Göethe is admirable, this Jewish boy takes a higher level: he is marvellous, wonderful; he is in himself a miracle. The miracles he wrought are nothing to the miracle he was, if at that era and in that condition of the world he invented Christianity. Whately says, "To disbelieve is to believe." I cannot be so credulous as to believe that any mere man invented

Christianity. Until you show me some loving heart that has felt more profoundly, some strong brain that, even with the aid of his example, has thought further, and added something important to religion, I must still use my common sense and say, *No man did all this*. I know Buddah's protest, and what he is said to have tried to do. To all that my answer is, *India past and present*. In testing ideas and elemental forces, if you give them centuries to work in, *success* is the only criterion. "By their fruits" is an inspired rule, not yet half understood and appreciated.

Our religion was never at peace with its age. Ours is the only faith whose first teacher and eleven out of the twelve original disciples died martyrs to their ideas. There is no other faith whose first teacher was not cherished and deified. The proof that some mighty power took possession of this Jewish mind, and lifted it above and flung it against its age, is that he himself and eleven of his twelve disciples forfeited, to the age, their lives for the message they brought.

I put aside all the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount—the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man; all the gleams which the noblest intellects of the classic and Asiatic world had undoubtedly of the truth. That was not it. A man who says that Christianity is but the outgrowth of a human intellect, must explain to me Europe as she stands to-day—the intelligence, morality and civilization of Europe as compared with the Asiatic civilization which has died out. Asiatic civilization failed from no lack of intellectual vigour or development. Tocqueville showed us that all the social problems and questions that agitate Europe and America to-day were debated to rags in Hindostan ages ago. Every one knows that Saracen Spain outshone all the rest of Europe for three or four centuries. The force wanting was a spiritual one. Body and brain without soul, Asia rotted away. From Confucius to Cicero there is light enough, but no heat.

If this is the essence of Christianity, what is our duty in view of it? A large proportion of the men who discuss radical religion, as well as orthodox religionists, mistake the essence of Christianity for speculation. We have an immense amount of speculation as to the nature of God, the soul's relation to God, the essence of the soul, the inspiration of the scriptures, the nature of sin, and the

characteristics of another state. It seems to me that most of that is dream and reverie. The marvel of the New Testament is that when you read it through only about one line in four touches upon any such problems. There is very little of it there. Christianity did not attempt to teach us any of these metaphysics. The glimpses it gave us of it were all accidental and indirect in passing along. All through the New Testament it is not the future life and the essence of the soul that are dwelt upon, it is the problems that make up the society of to-day. Open your New Testament and you will be surprised to find the comparative, the relative, amount that there is on one topic to what there is on the other. I think that while bishops were discussing the metaphysics of the soul, and German theologians were dividing brains, Christianity was writing its record by the pen of Beccaria, when he taught Europe a better system of penal laws. I remember, of course, the duty and value of prayer, the place devotion has, and the need all human nature has for meditation and self-culture. John Augustus kneeling at a Cathedral shrine would have been a Christian sight. But John Augustus in the Courts, saving drunkards from the shame and temptation and debasement of our jails, was a more Christ-like one. Viewed broadly, and noting the distinctive nature of Christianity, when Voltaire thundered across Europe in defence of Calas, struggling for rational religion, he was nearer to the heart of Christ than Jeremy Taylor when he wrote his eloquent and most religious essay, "Holy Living and Dying." Bating some human imperfection, trampling under foot his personal vices, and remembering only his large service to his race, when even that name of all names which the Christian has been taught to hate—when Thomas Paine went into the other world he was much more likely to be received with "Well done, good and faithful servant," than many a bishop who died under an English mitre.

There are two classes of philanthropy: one alleviates and the other cures. There is one class of philanthropy that undertakes when a man commits an evil to help him out of it. There is another class that endeavours to abolish the temptation. The first is sentiment, the last is Christianity.

The religion of to-day has too many pulpits. Men say we have

not churches enough. We have too many. Two hundred thousand men in New York never enter a church. There is not room. Thank God for that! If there are two hundred thousand Christian men in New York that cannot get into church, all the better. They do not need to enter. Christianity never intended the pulpit in the guise in which we have it. In yonder college do they keep boys for seventy years on their hands, lecturing to them on science? When Agassiz has taught his pupils fully, he sends them out to learn by practice. Of these fifty or sixty pulpits in this city we don't need more than ten or twenty. They will accommodate all who should hear preaching. The rest should be in the State Prison talking to the inmates; they should be in North Street labouring there amongst the poor and depraved. Their worship should be putting their gifts to use, not sitting down and hearing for a hundredth time a repetition of arguments against theft. There will never be any practical Christianity until we cease to teach it, and let men begin to learn by practice. You never saw a Quaker pauper, because the moment a member begins to fail, the better influences surround and besiege him, help him over the shallows, strengthen his purpose, watch his steps, hold up the weary hands and feeble knees, and see to it that he never falls so low as to be pauper. Break down these narrow Quaker walls, and let your Christianity model a world on the finer elements of that sect.

I would not have so many pulpits. "I'm not going to inflict a sermon on you," says your generously considerate friend. What a testimony! You should go to church when you absolutely need a message. You should go as the old Christian did, who went to pray and then off to his work. The existence of a poor class in a Christian community is an evidence that it is not a Christian community. There ought to be no permanently poor class in a Christian community. "Bear ye one another's burdens." Who shall so slander society as to say that there is not enough wealth to lift up its poverty? We never look at our duty in this respect. Christianity goes round amid the institutions of the world and stamps each as sin. Fashion cries no; wealth says it shall not be; and churches work to prevent it. But by-and-by the whole crashes down. Christianity marked slavery as sin one hundred

years ago. You may go to England and find blue-books that might be piled as high as Bunker's Hill, which were written by intelligent committees set to inquire whether it is safe to do right. The principle of truth was there carried out, however, and culminated with Wilberforce as he carried up eight hundred thousand broken fetters to God.

[Mr. Phillips here read an extract of an article published in one of the most religious of the daily papers in 1861, in which it was stated that the struggle between the North and the South might go on with such bitterness that we should be obliged to emancipate the slaves. The article said "the ordeal was one in which hypocritical philanthropists and bigoted religionists might exult, but from which genuine Christianity would pray most earnestly that the nation might be saved."]

Every man in political life now will say that he knew for years that slavery was wrong, but he didn't think it best to say so. Christianity says, "Whatever God tells you, don't look back to see if there is a man standing on your level who cannot see it; walk forward and tell what God has told you." Christianity does not reside in metaphysics. You won't find it in some of the most brilliant articles of the *Radical*, or in the stern creed of Andover. But you will find it in the Peace Society, the temperance organization, in prison discipline, in anti-slavery, in women's rights, and in the eight-hour movement. Some may smile at that, but the man who recognizes the right of every labouring man, and shows that he knows he has a soul, is nearer Christianity than he who can discuss all the points of the Godhead, live he either at Concord or anywhere else. But there is more real, essential Christianity at Concord than sleeps under a score of steeples.

In my recent argument before the legislative committee on the labour question I endeavoured to show that the working men should have better opportunities to improve themselves physically, morally, and spiritually, with the aid of more leisure, and thus secure a better civilization; but the only consideration that could be expected to have weight with the committee was this: You must show that a man can do as much work in eight as he can in ten hours.

At New York, in a recent speech before an audience of three

thousand people, I alluded to the Governor's argument that alcohol was "food," and had nutritive properties as well as beef. Without consulting authorities, if alcohol was food, and any one would prove to me that beef caused two-thirds of the pauperism and crime in the community, then I demanded the prohibition of beef. One-half of the audience started at the fanaticism, and even the platform trembled at the audacity of such a claim. But Paul, the ever blessed fanatic and agitator, once said, "If meat maketh my brother to offend I will eat no flesh while the world standeth."

I believe in the regeneration of the world through Christianity, and that we are in a transition state. Christianity is moving forward to fresh triumphs, but there never will be a union of thought. You never can get the Methodist to stand side-by-side with the Calvinist, and the conservative and the radical to read the New Testament in the light of the same interpretation. It is a purpose and an opportunity, not a creed, that will unite Christianity; a benevolent movement, not an intellectual effort, that will ever make a seamless garment of the Christian church. If John Stuart Mill, who rejects the four Gospels, shall agitate Europe, so that working men shall be lifted from the pit they now occupy (a pit which is worse than any hell Calvin ever imagined), then I would say that Lord Shaftesbury is a dreamer, and John Stuart Mill the apostolic successor of St. Paul. "By their fruits ye shall know them," said the Master. Wherever a chain is broken, wherever a ray of light is admitted, wherever a noble purpose is struggling, wherever an obstacle is removed, there is Christianity.

There may be mummies hidden in the churches—metaphysicians dividing the truth according to the north or north-western side of a hair; but they will never be crucified; never have the Pharisees' and Sadducees' feeling that their time is come; they will never have the devils of their age asking to be sent into the swine. We don't know Jesus, and no man would know him if he came to-day. We imagine that he was a respectable, sentimental, decorous, moderate, careful, conservative element, who took a hall, and was decently surrounded. He was the sedition of the streets. He said to wealth, "You're robbery," and Christendom stood aghast. He said to Judah, "You are a tyranny." He arraigned unjust

power at its own feet. If a man does so now we send him to the Coventry of public contempt, or the house of correction. But that is where Christianity goes. That is the way it entered the world, and that is the way it grapples the world to-day. As the old Italian said in 1554, "There has not a Christian died in his bed for two hundred years." There will never be a Christian die in his bed in the sense in which he meant it. The distinctive representative, the typical, advanced Christian of his age will never die in a respectable bed, because the society of to-day, though growing out of a Christian subsoil, struggles yet to defy its master.

I have endeavoured to show the wise men at the State House that they were gravitating toward the despotism of incorporated wealth. I showed them that in a republican community you could not afford to have half the individuality of the masses taken away, because you would have no basis for our form of government to rest upon. I did not dare to say to that Legislature, "God gives to you the keeping, annually, of so many hundred thousand souls, and whether they are good voters or trustworthy citizens is a secondary matter. You should make these streets safe for immortal souls to grow up in." And yet that Legislature is better than a church, for it says there shall be no distinction of colour. It don't know caste. But when you go down to the old South church you find it has taken a leaf out of Hindostan, and has black men in one place and white men in another. This is church; the other is Christianity.

I have impressed this fact: Christianity is a divine force; it is the force to which we owe Europe. It is the key that unlocks the government, the society, the literature of Europe. It unfolds to you the goal to which we are all hastening, but you must not seek for it in the religious organizations. You must seek for it in representative and organized systems which undertake to hold its essence. The church as a milestone shows how far morals have travelled up to that moment. The moment it is found it is useless. It is like the bulwarks of Holland, good when the waters are outside, but all the worse when the waters are inside to keep them in. The pioneer goes through the forest girdling the trees as he moves, and five years after these trees are dead lumber. So Christianity goes through society dooming now this institution and now that custom as sinful,—soon they die. Look back forty years. Christianity

branded slavery as *sin*. Wealth laughed scornfully at the fanaticism. Fashion swept haughtily past in her pride. The State thought to smother the protest by statutes. The church clasped hands and blessed the plot. But a printer's boy yielded himself to the sublime inspiration; gave life to the martyrdom of the message; and when his hand struck off three million of fetters, the church said, "Yes, I did it, for did I not always say, 'There was no bond in Christ Jesus?'" Yes, you did. But when to take that terrible protest from your treasure-house and flare it in the face of an angry nation was grave peril and cruel sacrifice, you hid it! You always had the truth; your only lack was *life* to believe and *courage* to apply it. The question that lies beyond, and has for thirty years, is the question of race. We lifted races on to a dead level, and the church said, "Didn't I tell you God hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth?" And we all said: "Yes, you did. The trouble was that when it was crucifixion to apply it you could not see it."

The thing that lies beyond is sex. Will you crush woman out of her opportunities? The church says "Yes." But the age travels on, and by-and-by she will take her place side-by-side with man in politics as she does in society, and then the church will say, "Didn't I tell you so? There is neither male nor female in Christ." Then we shall say: "Yes you did: but when it was vulgar and unpopular and isolated to apply it, you were not there." And beyond that lies the darkened chamber of the labourer, who only rises to toil and lies down to rest. It is lighted by no hope, mellowed by no comfort; looks into gardens it created, and up to wealth which it has garnered, and has no pleasure thence; looks down into its cradle—there is no hope; and Stuart Mill says to the church, "Come and claim for labour its great share in civilization and its products;" the bench of bishops say, "Let us have a charity school;" Episcopacy says, "We will print a primer;" the dissenting interest says, "We will have cheap soup-houses;" Lord Shaftesbury says, "We will have May-day pastimes;" and gaunt labour says, "I don't ask pity, I ask for justice. In the name of the Christian brotherhood I ask for justice." And the church quietly hides itself behind its prayer-book, and the great vital force underneath bears us onward, till by-and-by through the ballot,

by the power of selfish interest, by the combination of necessity, labour will clutch its rights, and the church will say, "So, I did it!"

You have no right to luxuriate. If you are Christian men you should sell your sword and garments, go into your neighbor's house and start a public opinion and rouse and educate the masses. One soul with an idea out-weighs ninety-nine men moved only by interest. Though they are powerful obstacles in our pathway they will be permeated by the idea we advocate, as was Cæsar's palace by the weeds nurtured by an Italian summer. It was supposed that nothing less than an earthquake that would shake the seven hills could disturb the solid walls; but the tiny weeds of an Italian summer struck root between them and tossed the huge blocks of granite into shapeless ruins. So must inevitably our ideas—the only *living* forces—for a while overawed by marble, and gold, and iron, and organization—heave all to ruin and rebuild on a finer model.

