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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 114

The Unity Of The Divine Being

"There is one God." Mark 12:32.

1. And as there is one God, so there is one religion and one happiness for all men. God never intended there should be any more; and it is not possible there should. Indeed, in another sense, as the Apostle observes, "there are gods many, and lords many." All the heathen nations had their gods; and many, whole shoals of them. And generally, the more polished they were, the more gods they heaped up to themselves. But to us, to all that are favoured with the Christian Revelation, "there is but one God;" who declares himself, "Is there any God besides me There is none; I know not any."

2. But who can search out this God to perfection None of the creatures that he has made. Only some of his attributes he hath been pleased to reveal to us in his word. Hence we learn that God is an eternal Being. "His goings forth are from everlasting," and will continue to everlasting. As he ever was, so he ever will be; as there was no beginning of his existence, so there will be no end. This is universally allowed to be contained in his very name, Jehovah; which the Apostle John accordingly renders, "He that was, and that is, and that is to come." Perhaps it would be as proper to say, "He is from everlasting to everlasting."

3. Nearly allied to the eternity of God, is his omnipresence. As he exists through infinite duration, so he cannot but exist through infinite space; according to his own question, equivalent to the strongest assertion, -- "Do not I fill heaven and earth saith the Lord;" (heaven and earth in the Hebrew idiom, implying the whole universe;) which, therefore, according to his own declaration, is filled with his presence.

4. This one, eternal, omnipresent Being is likewise all- perfect. He has, from eternity to eternity, all the perfections and infinitely more than it ever did or ever can enter into the heart of man to conceive; yea, infinitely more than the angels in heaven can conceive; These perfections we usually term, the attributes of God.

5. And he is omnipotent, as well as omnipresent; there can be no more bounds to his power, than to his presence. He "hath a mighty arm; strong is his hand, and high is his right hand." He doeth whatsoever pleaseth him, in the heavens, the earth, the sea, and in all deep places. With men we know many things are impossible, but not with God: With him "all things are possible." Whensoever he willeth, to do is present with him.

6. The omniscience of God is a clear and necessary consequence of his omnipresence. If he is present in every part of the universe, he cannot but know whatever is, or is done there; according to the word of St. James, "Known unto God are all his works," and the works of every creature, "from the beginning" of the world; or rather, as the phrase literally implies, "from eternity." His eyes are not only "over all the earth, beholding the evil and the good;" but likewise over the whole creation, yea, and the paths of uncreated night. Is there any difference between his knowledge and his wisdom If there be, is not his knowledge the more general term, (at least, according to our weak conceptions.) and his wisdom a particular branch of it; namely, the knowing the end of everything that exists, and the means of applying it to that end.

7. Holiness is another of the attributes of the almighty, all-wise God. He is infinitely distant from

every touch of evil. He "is light; and in him is no darkness at all." He is a God of unblemished justice and truth; but above all is his mercy. This we may easily learn from that beautiful passage in the thirty- third and fourth chapters of Exodus: "And Moses said, I beseech thee, show me thy glory. And the Lord descended in the cloud, and proclaimed the name of the Lord, -- The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

8. This God is a Spirit; not having such a body, such parts or passions, as men have. It was the opinion both of the ancient Jews and the ancient Christians, that He alone is a pure Spirit, totally separate from all matter; whereas they supposed all other spirits, even the highest angels, even cherubim and seraphim, to dwell in material vehicles, though of an exceeding light and subtile substance. At that point of duration which the infinite wisdom of God saw to be most proper, for reasons which lie hid in the abyss of his own understanding, not to be fathomed by any finite mind, God "called into being all that is;" created the heavens and the earth, together with all that they contain. "All things were created by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." He created man, in particular, after his own image, to be "a picture of his own eternity." When he had raised man from the dust of the earth, he breathed into him an immortal spirit. Hence he is peculiarly called, "The Father of our spirits;" yea, "The Father of the spirits of all flesh."

9. He "made all things," as the wise man observes, "for himself;" "for his glory they were created." Not "as if he needed anything;" seeing "he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." He made all things to be happy. He made man to be happy in Himself. He is the proper centre of spirits; for whom every created spirit was made. So true is that well-known saying of the ancient Fathers: *Fecisti nos ad te: et irrequietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*: "Thou has made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest, till it resteth in thee."

10. This observation gives us a clear answer to that question in the Assembly's Catechism: "For what end did God create man" The answer is, "To glorify and enjoy him for ever." This is undoubtedly true; but is it quite clear, especially to men of ordinary capacities Do the generality of common people understand that expression, "To glorify God" No; no more than they understand Greek. And it is altogether above the capacity of children; to whom we can scarce ever speak plain enough. Now, is not this the very principle that should be inculcated upon every human creature, -- "You are made to be happy in God," as soon as ever reason dawns Should not every parent, as soon as a child begins to talk, or to run alone, say something of this kind: "See! what is that which shines so over your head That we call the sun. See, how bright it is! Feel how it warms you! It makes the grass to spring, and everything to grow. But God made the sun. The sun could not shine, nor warm, nor do any good without him." In this plain and familiar way a wise parent might, many times in a day, say something of God; particularly insisting, "He made you; and he made you to be happy in him; and nothing else can make you happy." We cannot press this too soon. If you say, "Nay, but they cannot understand you when they are so young;" I answer, No; nor when they are fifty years old, unless God opens their understanding: And can he not do this at any age

11. Indeed, this should be pressed on every human creature, young and old, the more earnestly and diligently, because so exceeding few, even of those that are called Christians, seem to know anything about it. Many indeed think of being happy with God in heaven; but the being happy in God on earth never entered into their thoughts. The less so, because from the time they come into the world, they are surrounded with idols. Such, in turns, are all "the things that are seen," (whereas God is not seen,)

which all promise an happiness independent of God. Indeed, it is true that,

Upright both in heart and will We by our God were made;

But we turn'd from good to ill, And o'er the creatures stray'd;

Multiplied our wandering thought, Which first was fix'd on God alone;

In ten thousand objects sought The bliss we lost in one.

12. These idols, these rivals of God, are innumerable; but they may be nearly reduced to three parts. First. Objects of sense; such as gratify one or more of our outward senses. These excite the first kind of "love of the world," which St. John terms, "the desire of the flesh." Secondly. Objects of the imagination; things that gratify our fancy, by their grandeur, beauty, or novelty. All these make us fair promises of happiness, and thereby prevent our seeking it in God. This the Apostle terms, "the desire of the eyes;" whereby, chiefly, the imagination is gratified. They are, Thirdly, what St. John calls, "the pride of life." He seems to mean honour, wealth, and whatever directly tends to engender pride.

13. But suppose we were guarded against all these, are there not other idols which we have need to be apprehensive of; and idols, therefore, the more dangerous, because we suspect no danger from them For is there any danger to be feared from our friends and relations; from the mutual endearments of husbands and wives, or of parents and children Ought we not to bear a very tender affection to them Ought we not to love them only less than God Yea, and is there not a tender affection due to those whom God has made profitable to our souls Are we not commanded to "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" All this is unquestionably true; and this very thing makes the difficulty. Who is sufficient for this -- to go far enough herein, and no farther to love them enough, and not too much Can we love a wife, a child, a friend, well enough, without loving the creature more than the creator Who is able to follow the caution which St. Paul gives to the Christians at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:5.)

14. I wish that weighty passage (so strangely disguised in our translation) were duly considered: "Let every one of you know how to possess his vessel," his wife, "in sanctification and honour;" so as neither to dishonour God nor himself; nor to obstruct, but further, holiness. St. Paul goes on, *Mh en paqei epikumias*, which we render, "Not in the lust of concupiscence," (What is this It gives the English reader no conception at all. *Paqos* means any violent or impetuous affection. *Epiqumia* is desire. By the two words the Apostle undoubtedly means vehement and impetuous affections,) -- "as the Gentiles who know not God," and so may naturally seek happiness in a creature.

15. If, by the grace of God, we have avoided or forsaken all these idols, there is still one more dangerous than all the rest; that is, religion. It will easily be conceived, I mean false religion; that is, any religion which does not imply the giving of the heart to God. Such is, First, a religion of opinions; or what is called orthodoxy. Into this snare fall thousands of those who profess to hold "salvation by faith;" indeed, all of those who, by faith, mean only a system of Arminian or Calvinian opinions. Such is, Secondly, a religion of forms; of barely outward worship, how constantly soever performed; yea, though we attend the Church Service every day, and the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Such is, Thirdly, a religion of works; of seeking the favour of God by doing good to men. Such is, Lastly, a religion of Atheism; that is, every religion whereof God is not laid for the foundation. In a word, a religion wherein "God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself," is not the Alpha and Omega, the

beginning and the end, the first and the last point.

16. True religion is right tempers towards God and man. It is, in two words, gratitude and benevolence; gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our fellow creatures. In other words, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.

17. It is in consequence of our knowing God loves us, that we love him, and love our neighbour as ourselves. Gratitude towards our Creator cannot but produce benevolence to our fellow creatures. The love of Christ constrains us, not only to be harmless, to do no ill to our neighbour, but to be useful, to be "zealous of good works;" "as we have time, to do good unto all men;" and to be patterns to all of true, genuine morality; of justice, mercy, and truth. This is religion, and this is happiness; the happiness for which we were made. This begins when we begin to know God, by the teaching of his own Spirit. As soon as the Father of spirits reveals his Son in our hearts, and the Son reveals his Father, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts; then, and not till then, we are happy. We are happy, first, in the consciousness of his favour, which indeed is better than life itself; next, in the constant communion with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ; then, in all the heavenly tempers which he hath wrought in us by his Spirit; again, in the testimony of his Spirit, that all our works please him; and, lastly, in the testimony of our own spirits, that "in simplicity and godly sincerity we have had our conversation in the world." Standing fast in this liberty from sin and sorrow, wherewith Christ hath made them free, real Christians "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks." And their happiness still increases as they "grow up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

18. But how little is this religion experienced, or even thought of, in the Christian world! On the contrary, what reason have we to take up the lamentation of a dying saint, (Mr. Haliburton, of St. Andrew's in Scotland,) "O Sirs, I am afraid a kind of rational religion is more and more prevailing amongst us; a religion that has nothing of Christ belonging to it; nay, that has not only nothing of Christ, but nothing of God in it!" And indeed how generally does this prevail, not only among professed infidels, but also among those who call themselves Christians; who profess to believe the Bible to be the word of God! Thus our own countryman, Mr. Wollaston, in that elaborate work, "The Religion of Nature Delineated," presents us with a complete system of religion, without anything of God about it; without being beholden, in any degree, to either the Jewish or Christian revelation. Thus Monsieur Burlomachi, of Geneva, in his curious "Treatise on the Law of Nature," does not make any more use of the Bible than if he had never seen it. And thus the late Professor Hutcheson, of Glasgow, (a stranger writer than either of the other,) is so far from grounding virtue on either the fear or the love of God, that he quite shuts God out of the question; not scrupling to declare, in express terms, that a regard to God is inconsistent with virtue; insomuch that, if in doing a beneficent action you expect God to reward it, the virtue of the action is lost: It is then not a virtuous but a selfish action.

19. Perhaps, indeed, there are not many who carry the matter to so great a length. But how great is the number of those who, allowing religion to consist of two branches, -- our duty to God, and our duty to our neighbour, -- entirely forget the first part, and put the second part for the whole, -- for the entire duty of man! Thus almost all men of letters, both in England, France, Germany, yea, and all the civilized countries of Europe, extol humanity to the skies, as the very essence of religion. To this the great triumvirate, Rousseau, Voltaire, and David Hume, have contributed all their labours, sparing no pains to establish a religion which should stand on its own foundation, independent on any revelation whatever; yea, not supposing even the being of a God. So leaving Him, if he has any being, to himself,

they have found out both a religion and a happiness which have no relation at all to God, nor any dependence upon him.

20. It is no wonder that this religion should grow fashionable, and spread far and wide in the world. But call it humanity, virtue, morality, or what you please, it is neither better nor worse than Atheism. Men hereby wilfully and designedly put asunder what God has joined, -- the duties of the first and the second table. It is separating the love of our neighbour from the love of God. It is a plausible way of thrusting God out of the world he has made. They can do the business without him; and so either drop him entirely, not considering him at all, or suppose that since

He gave things their beginning,

And set this whirlingig a-spinning, he has not concerned himself with these trifles, but let every thing take its own course.

21. On the contrary, we have the fullest evidence that the eternal, omnipresent, almighty, all-wise Spirit, as he created all things, so he continually superintends whatever he has created. He governs all, not only to the bounds of creation, but through the utmost extent of space; and not only through the short time that is measured by the earth and sun, but from everlasting to everlasting. We know that as all nature, so all religion, and all happiness, depend on him; and we know that whoever teach to seek happiness without him are monsters, and the pests of society.

22. But after all the vain attempts of learned or unlearned men, it will be found, as there is but one God, so there is but one happiness, and one religion. And both of these centre in God. Both by Scripture and by experience we know that an unholy, and therefore an unhappy, man, seeking rest, but finding none, is sooner or later convinced that sin is the ground of his misery; and cries out of the deep to Him that is able to save, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" It is not long before he finds "redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins." Then "the Father reveals his Son" in his heart; and he "calls Jesus, Lord, by the Holy Ghost." And then the love of God is "shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit which is given unto him." From this principle springs real, disinterested benevolence to all mankind; making him humble, meek, gentle to all men, easy to be entreated, -- to be convinced of what is right, and persuaded to what is good; inviolably patient, with a thankful acquiescence in every step of his adorable providence. This is religion, even the whole mind which was also in Christ Jesus. And has any man the insolence or the stupidity to deny that this is happiness; yea, that it

Yields more of happiness below

Than victors in a triumph know

23. There can be no doubt but from this love to God and man a suitable conversation will follow. His "communication," that is, discourse, will "be always in grace, seasoned with salt, and meet to minister grace to the hearers." He will always "open his mouth with wisdom, and there will be in his tongue the law of kindness." Hence his affectionate words will "distil as the dew, and as the rain upon the tender herb." And men will know, it is not he only that speaks, but the Spirit of the Father that speaketh in him. His actions will spring from the same source with his words; even from the abundance of a loving heart. And while all these aim at the glory of God, and tend to this one point, whatever he does, he may truly say, --

End of my every action thou,

In all things thee I see:

Accept my hallow'd labour now,

I do it as to thee!

24. He to whom this character belongs, and he alone, is a Christian. To him the one, eternal, omnipresent, all-perfect Spirit, is the "Alpha and Omega, the first and the last;" not his Creator only, but his Sustainer, his Preserver, his Governor; yea, his Father, his Savior, Sanctifier, and Comforter. This God is his God, and his All, in time and in eternity. It is the benevolence springing from this root which is pure and undefiled religion. But if it be built on any other foundation, as it is of no avail in the sight of God, so it brings no real, solid, permanent happiness to man, but leaves him still a poor, dry, indigent, and dissatisfied creature.

25. Let all therefore that desire to please God condescend to be taught of God, and take care to walk in that path which God himself hath appointed. Beware of taking half of this religion for the whole; but take both parts of it together. And see that you begin where God himself begins: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Is not this the first, our Lord himself being the Judge, as well as the great, commandment First, therefore, see that ye love God; next, your neighbour, -- every child of man. From this fountain let every temper, every affection, every passion flow. So shall that "mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Let all your thoughts, words, and actions spring from this! So shall you "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world." Preached at DUBLIN, April 9, 1789.

Edited by Carla Joy with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene University (Nampa, ID) for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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-
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 -
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 -
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-
- [An Address to the Clergy](#)
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-
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-
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-
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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

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[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

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[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

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[Charles Wesley](#)

[Arminianism](#)

[Noncanonical Literature](#)

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