

ESSAY

On the Nature of Vital Piety, its Sameness in all Ages and Countries, and its Various Aspects in Different Circumstances

by

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True religion not only enlightens the understanding but rectifies the affections of the heart. All genuine feelings of piety are the effects of divine truth. The variety and intensity of these feelings depend on the different kinds of truth and the various aspects in which the same truth is viewed, and also on the distinctness and clearness with which it is presented to the mind. In a state of moral perfection, truth would uniformly produce all those emotions and affections which correspond with its nature without the aid of any superadded influence. That these effects are not experienced by all who have the opportunity of knowing the truth is a strong evidence of human depravity. In a state of moral depravity, the mind is incapable alike of perceiving and feeling the beauty and excellence of divine truth. The dead neither see nor feel, and man is by nature "dead in trespasses and sins." Hence, the necessity of the agency of the Holy Spirit to illuminate and regenerate the mind.

The nature of divine agency, in every case, is inscrutable by mortals. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." We know, however, that the work of the Spirit in the regeneration of the heart is adapted to the rational nature of man. The thing to be accomplished is not the creation of some new faculty; it is a moral renovation. And all moral changes must be effected by understanding and choice.

To put the soul, therefore, in that state in which it will rightly understand the truth and cordially choose the highest good is the end of regeneration. Truth, therefore, must be the means by which actual conversion to God takes place. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth." "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

Although piety in the heart is the effect of a divine operation, yet all its exercises take place agreeably to the common laws of our rational nature. The understanding is enlightened, the judgment is convinced, motives operate on the will, and conscience approves or disapproves. That the soul, in the exercises of piety, is under the renovating influences of the Holy Spirit is not known by any consciousness which it has of these divine operations, but by the effects produced in a change of views and feelings. And this change is ascribed to God, because no other is able to product it, and his word assures us that he is its author.

Now as all men are endowed with the same natural susceptibilities, and as all Christians contemplate the same fundamental truths, the work of grace in the hearts of all must be substantially the same. All have, by the knowledge of the law, been convinced of sin, have been made to feel sorrow, shame, and compunction [remorse] upon the recollection of their transgressions, and to submit to the justice of the sentence of condemnation which the law denounces against them. All have been made sensible of their own inability to save themselves, and under the influence of these humbling and penitent feelings have been led to seek refuge in Jesus Christ as the only hope of their souls. This plan of salvation appears glorious and suitable to all believers, so that they not only acquiesce in it as the only method of salvation, but they are so well pleased with it that they would not have another if they could. And in the acceptance of Christ as a complete Saviour, there is, in every case, some experience of joy and peace.

Connected with the views which the true believer has of Christ as a Saviour, there is also a discovery, more or less clear, of the glory of the divine attributes, especially of those which are most conspicuously manifested in the cross of Christ. Holiness, justice, mercy, and truth shine in the view of the sincere convert with a luster surpassing all other excellence; and God is venerated and loved for his own intrinsic excellence as well as for the rich benefits bestowed upon us. But although these views may be distinguished, yet in experience they are not separated. The brightest discovery of divine excellence ever made is God's love to our miserable race. The law of God is also viewed to be holy, just, and good by every regenerated soul. The unrenewed heart never is, nor ever can be, reconciled to the law: "It is not subject to it, nor indeed can be." But the "new man" delights in the law of God and would not have one precept of it altered; and while it condemns all his feelings and works as imperfect, he approves of it still and blames himself for his want [lack] of conformity to a rule so perfect.

Another thing in which the experience of all Christians is uniform is that they all are brought to a deliberate purpose to be on the Lord's side. On this point there is no hesitancy. Many are affected and much agitated with religious impressions, and yet never come to a full decision to choose God and his service. They halt between two opinions and have a divided mind. Such persons, however lively their feelings, are not yet truly converted. All true converts, after counting the cost, have settled this point forever, and they can say with the Psalmist, "My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed." They are, therefore, prepared now to comply with the terms of discipleship laid down by Christ himself. They are willing to "deny themselves, to take up their cross and follow him; to forsake father and mother, wife and children, houses and lands, yes, also their own lives for the sake of Him who gave himself for them."

Out of such views and feelings as have been described arises an ardent hungering and thirsting after righteousness, an intense desire to know more of God and to be admitted into closer union and more intimate communion with him. These habitual desires of the renewed soul find their proper expression in prayer and lead to a patient and earnest waiting upon God in all the ordinances and means of his appointment. True piety, however, does not stop in mere desires

or in attendance on religious duties; it seeks to glory God by action. The earnest inquiry of every soul inspired with the love of God is, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" And wherever there is piety towards God there will exist benevolence towards men.

One of the most sensible emotions of the young convert is "good-will to men"-- a sincere desire for the welfare and eternal salvation of all, not even excepting its most inveterate enemies. And towards the children of God there springs up a strong and tender affection. Such seem to be brethren indeed, because they are the brethren of Christ and bear something of his image in the humility, meekness, and benevolence of their character. In short, genuine piety disposes and determines all who are its subjects to obey and respect all the commandments of God, and to hate and avoid all sin, according to that declaration of David, "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and hate every false way."

In all the above-mentioned essential characteristics of piety there is a sameness in the exercises of all true Christians. The same impression has been made on every renewed heart, and the only difference is that it is imprinted more deeply on some than others. But still the characters are identical, and therefore the evidences of a work of grace contained in the holy Scriptures are equally applicable to all persons who have been brought from darkness to light.

There often is, moreover, a striking resemblance in those accompanying exercises and circumstances which are not essential. Awakened sinners are liable to the same erroneous conceptions and usually fall into the same mistakes. They are all prone to think that by reforming their lives they can restore themselves to the favor of God. They commonly apply to the works of the law for relief in the first instance, and when driven from this false refuge by a clearer view of the spirituality and extent of the law and the depth of their own depravity, they are apt to give up all for lost and seriously to conclude that there is no hope in their case.

They are all prone to misapprehend the nature of the Gospel. Of its freeness they can at first form no conception, and therefore they think it necessary to come with some price in their hands--to obtain some kind of preparation or fitness before they venture to come to Christ. And when it is clear that no moral fitness can be obtained until they apply to him, this legal spirit will lead the soul under conviction to think that very deep and pungent distress will recommend it to Christ. Thus many are found seeking and praying for a more deep and alarming impression of their sin and danger.

It is also very common to place undue dependence on particular means, especially on such as have been much blessed to others. Anxious souls are prone to think that in reading some particular book or in hearing some successful preacher they will receive the grace of God which brings salvation, [but] in which expectation they are generally disappointed and are brought at last to feel that they are entirely dependent on sovereign grace, and that they can do nothing to obtain that grace. Before they were like a drowning man catching at everything which seemed to promise support, but now they are like a man who feels that he has no support but is actually sinking. Their cry, therefore, is now truly a cry for *mercy*. "God be merciful

unto me a sinner." "Lord save, I perish." And it has often been proverbially said, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity," which is commonly realized by the soul cut off from all dependence on itself. The arm of the Lord is stretched forth to preserve it from sinking, the Saviour's voice of love and mercy is heard, light breaks in upon the soul and it finds itself embraced in the arms of the Saviour. And so wonderful is the transition that it can scarcely trust to its own experience.

This similarity of feelings in the experience of the pious has often been remarked [noted] and has been justly considered a strong evidence of the divine origin of experimental religion. For how, otherwise, can this uniformity of the views and feelings of the pious in all ages and countries be accounted for? Enthusiasm assumes a thousand different shapes and hues and is marked by no uniform characteristics. But scriptural piety is the same now as in the days of David and Asaph, the same as when Paul lived, the same as experienced by the pious fathers of the Christian church, the same as described by the Reformers, by the Puritans, and by the evangelical preachers and writers of the present day.

When the Gospel takes effect on any of the heathen, although it is certain that they never had the opportunity of learning anything of this kind from others, yet we find them expressing the same feelings which are common to other Christians. Persons from different quarters of the globe whose vernacular tongue is entirely different, yet speak the same language in religion. Members of churches which hold no communion and which, perhaps, view each other when at a distance as heretics, often, when brought together, recognize in one another dear brethren who are of one mind in their religious experience.

The late eminently pious and learned theologian, the Rev. Dr. Livingston, related to me not many years before his decease a pleasant anecdote which will serve to illustrate the point under consideration, and which I communicate to the public the more willingly because I do not know that he has left any record of it behind him.

While a student at the university of Utrecht, a number of pious persons from the town, and from among the students, were accustomed to meet for free conversation on experimental religion and for prayer and praise in a social capacity. On one of these occasions, when the similarity of the exercises of the pious in all countries and ages was the subject of conversation, it was remarked [noted] by one of the company that there was then present a representative from each of the four quarters of the world. These were Dr. Livingston from America, a young man from the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, another student from one of the Dutch possessions in the East Indies, and many natives of Europe of course. It was therefore proposed that at the next meeting the three young gentlemen first referred to, together with an eminently pious young nobleman of Holland, should each give a particular narrative of the rise and progress of the work of grace in his own soul. The proposal was universally acceptable, and accordingly a narrative was heard from a native of each of the four quarters of the globe--of their views and feelings, of their trials and temptations, etc.

The result was highly gratifying to all present, and I think Dr. Livingston said that it was generally admitted by those present that they had never before witnessed so interesting a scene. And since I have taken the liberty of mentioning the name of that venerable and distinguished theologian, I beg leave to add that I have never seen a man who appeared to love vital piety more or to understand its nature better.

But the identity of religious feeling which has been described above is consistent with a great variety in many of the accompanying circumstances. Indeed, it seems probable that each individual Christian has something distinctly characteristic in his own case, so that there exists at least as much difference in the peculiar features of the inner as of the outward man. The causes of this diversity are manifold: as first, the different degrees of grace received in the commencement of the divine life; secondly, the extent to which they have respectively run in sin and the suddenness or gradual nature of their change; thirdly, the degree of religious knowledge which is possessed; and finally, no small diversity arises from the various constitutional temperaments of different persons, which must have a powerful effect in giving complexion to the exercises of religion. To all which may be added the manner in which persons under religious impressions are treated by their spiritual guides, and especially the manner in which the Gospel is preached to them.

It has been remarked by men of exact observation that particular revivals of religion are often marked by something peculiar in the exercises and in the spirit of those who are the subjects of them. In some revivals convictions are more pungent and awful, or continued for a longer time, than in others. And the converts in some revivals appear to acquire a much deeper and more abiding impression of the reality and glory of divine things, and are evidently more under the constraining influence of the love of Christ, than is observable in other cases. These are subjects which deserve a careful investigation. And as revivals are increasing in frequency and extent in our churches, and as different modes of conducting them are in use, it is highly important that some man of deep experience and sober impartial judgment should make observations extensively and communicate them to the religious public, which is in many places perplexed and distracted with the different methods of treatment recommended by different persons and different parties.

It may, however, be laid down as a sound maxim that in proportion as the truth of God is clearly brought to view and faithfully applied to the heart and conscience, the good effects will be manifest. Erroneous opinions, although mingled with the essential truths of the Gospel, will ever tend to mar the work of God. The good produced on any individual or on a society must not be judged of by the violence of the feelings excited but by their character. Men may be consumed by a fiery zeal and yet exhibit little of the meekness, humility, and sweet benevolence of Jesus. Great pretenders and high professors may be proud, arrogant, and censorious. When these are the effects, we may without fear declare "that they know not what manner of spirit they are of." Any religion, however corrupt, may have its zealots; but true Christianity consists in the fruits of the Spirit, which are "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

Piety seems also to assume an aspect somewhat different in different ages and periods of the church. There is in human nature a strong tendency to run to extremes, and from one extreme immediately to the opposite. And as the imperfections of our nature mingle with everything which we touch, so piety itself is not exempt from the influence of the tendency above mentioned. In one age, or in one religious community, the leaning is to enthusiasm; in another to superstition. At one time religion is made to assume a severe and gloomy aspect, the conscience is morbidly scrupulous, things indifferent are viewed as sins, and human infirmities are magnified into crimes. At such times all cheerfulness is proscribed [denounced], and the Christian whom nature prompts to smile feels a check from the monitor within. This alloy of genuine piety is also often connected with bigotry and censoriousness.

Now when true religion is disfigured by such defects, it appears before the world to great disadvantage. Men of the world form their opinions of the nature of piety from what they observe in its professors; and from such an exhibition of it as we have described, they often take up prejudices which are never removed. There is, however, an opposite extreme not less dangerous and injurious than this--when professors of religion conform to the world so far that no clear distinction can be observed between the Christian and the worldling.

If the former error drives men away from religion as a sour and miserable thing, this [opposite extreme] leads them to the opinion that Christians are actuated by the same principles as they are; and therefore they conclude that no great change of their character is necessary. It is sometimes alleged by professors who thus accommodate themselves to the fashions and amusements of the world, that they hope by this means to render religion attractive and thus gain over to piety those who neglect it. But this is a weak pretext, for such conformity always tends to confirm people in their carelessness. When they see professors at the theater or figuring [dancing] in the ballroom, their conclusion either is that there is no reality in vital piety or that these professors act inconsistently.

The religious habits of some serious professors of religion are adapted to make a very unfavorable impression on the minds of sensible men. They assume a demure and sanctimonious air and speak in an affected and drawling tone, often sighing and lifting up their eyes and giving audible utterance to their ejaculations. Now these persons may be, and I doubt not often are, truly pious. But the impression made on most minds by this affectation of religious solemnity is that they are hypocrites who aim at being thought uncommonly devout.

It appears to me that religion never appears so lovely as when she wears the dress of perfect simplicity. We ought not, indeed, to be ashamed of our religion before the world, but it behooves us to be very careful not to give to others an unfavorable opinion of serious piety. The rule is, "Let your light so shine that others seeing your good works may glorify your Father who is in heaven." "Let not your good be evil spoken of."

But the aspect and character of the piety of one age may differ from that of another, more from

the peculiar circumstances in which Christians are placed than from the prevalence of erroneous views or incorrect habits. In one age vital piety seeks retirement and runs in hidden channels. At such a time the attention of Christians is turned chiefly on themselves. Much time is devoted to devotional exercises, often whole days. The secret recesses of the heart are explored with diligence and rigor. Indwelling sin is detected in its multiform appearances and is mortified with invincible resolution. The various means of personal growth in grace are studied and used with persevering assiduity. And much useful knowledge of the nature of the spiritual life in the soul is acquired.

But while vital piety is thus carefully cultivated and the attention is earnestly turned to the exercises of the heart, there may be very little display of active, enlarged benevolence; there may be few vigorous efforts made to ameliorate the condition of the multitudes perishing in sin. Under the influence of these defective views of the nature of religion, many pious persons in the early ages of Christianity withdrew entirely from the world and lived in the wilderness, which mistake occasioned innumerable evils to the church, the effects of which are not yet obliterated.

The spirit of piety among the Reformers seems to have been pure and vigorous, but not as expansive as it might have been. They seem scarcely to have thought of the hundreds of millions of heathen in the world, and of course made no efforts to extend the knowledge of salvation to them. Indeed, they were so much occupied at home in contending for the faith against the Romanists that they had little time left for benevolent enterprises at a distance. But if that zeal, which was worse than wasted in controversy with one another had been directed to the conversion of the heathen, their usefulness would have been far greater than it was.

The Puritans also, although profoundly acquainted with experimental religion, seemed to have confined their attention too exclusively to themselves. Their ministers were, it is true, silenced and driven into corners and into exile by an ungrateful and tyrannical government. But it seems wonderful [surprising] to us that when prevented from preaching the Gospel to their own countrymen they did not turn to the gentiles. But the era of missions had not yet arrived, and probably they had but small opportunity in their persecuted state of uniting their counsels or combining their energies in schemes of distant benevolence.

One thing, however, is now manifest: that the providence of God overruled the retirement and leisure of those godly ministers who were ejected from their charges so as to render their labors more useful to the church than if they had been permitted to spend their lives in preaching the Gospel. For, when deprived of the liberty of employing their tongues, they betook themselves to their pens, and they have left to the church such a body of practical and casuistical theology as all ages, before or since, cannot equal. I have no doubt that such men as Owen, Baxter, Flavel, Bunyan, Goodwin, Manton, Howe, and Bates have effected much more good by their practical writings than they could possibly have done by their preaching, supposing them to have been ever so successful.

But our lot is cast in a different age and in a different state of the church. After a long slumber the attention of Christians has been aroused to consider the perishing condition of the heathen. We live in a period when great designs are entertained and plans formed for the conversion of the whole world, when one benevolent enterprise or institution follows another in rapid succession until the Christian community begins to exhibit an entirely new aspect from what it did within our own remembrance. Christians have begun to feel that by a combination of effort they have power to accomplish much. The public attention is kept awake by the frequent recurrence of public meetings of an interesting kind, and by that more potent engine--the wide circulation of religious PERIODICALS, by which interesting intelligence is conveyed to almost every corner of our extensive country.

The duty of Christians to be active is now inculcated in almost every form. Tracts are multiplied, the Scriptures are circulated, the young and ignorant are instructed by new methods, and many are found running to and fro to promote the propagation of evangelical truth. Revivals of religion also are exerting a mighty influence on the church. The number of serious Christians is vastly increased, and many youth are brought forward to a course of preparation for the gospel ministry.

A spirit of liberality also is witnessed, unknown to our fathers; and the duty of consecrating to the Lord a reasonable proportion of all their increase is beginning to be extensively felt among serious Christians. And such is the spirit of enterprise that no undertaking appears too arduous, which has for its object the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom. And such is the favor of heaven towards benevolent enterprises in our day that scarcely one has failed of accomplishing some good, and although the schemes of benevolence are so various and so multiplied, yet there has occurred no sensible interference of one with another. As they all aim at the same object, so they are all viewed as parts of the same great system of operations. Now in all these favorable appearances and benevolent exertions every pious heart must and will rejoice.

But is there no danger that many who feel interested in the operations of the day and contribute to their advancement should be mistaken as to their true spiritual condition? When a powerful current takes a set, many will be carried along with it, whichever way it may run. And is there no danger that Christians themselves, while they seem to flourish in external profession, zeal, and activity, may be decaying at the root for want of sufficient attention to their own hearts and to the duties of the closet? There is, indeed, much reason to fear that many professors now exist who confine their religion too much to those external acts which may be performed from motives no higher than those which operate on unrenewed men. The danger now is that the religion of the heart will be neglected and that many will feel well satisfied with themselves on account of their activity and zeal, who are yet strangers to a work of grace.

Note: This is the introductory essay in *Advice to a Young Christian on the Importance of Aiming at an Elevated Standard of Piety*, by a Village Pastor (acknowledged to be J. B. Waterbury), published by the American Tract Society, first published in 1830. No changes have been made except for updating some punctuation and dividing long paragraphs.