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READING THE SCRIPTURES WITH PRAYER

An interview with the Pope, during which the claims of the Catholic Church had been earnestly pressed, closed with these words:

“Pray, pray for light from the Lord, for grace to acknowledge the truth; because this is the only means of attaining to it. Controversy will do no good. In controversy is pride and self-love. People, in controversy, make a parade of their knowledge, of their acuteness, and after all, every one continues to hold his own views. Prayer alone gives light and strength for the acquirement of truth and grace. For God wishes that we should humble ourselves, and he gives his grace to the humble.”

Such is the process by which perverts to Rome are multiplied. Is there not something wrong about it? Are the words of Pius, after all, true? We think not. In similar tones and language,

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many an old Rabbi would, in our Lord’s time, have addressed a young disciple of Christ, in order to win him back to the old faith; and, in similar tones, many a self-satisfied religionist still warns and rebukes the inquiring spirit.

But wherein is it wrong? Is it not true that our first duty is to pray for light and grace? Unquestionably it is. Further; is it not true that, for the most part, in controversy there is much pride and self-love? and that men engaged in it often seek rather to display their acuteness than anything else? It cannot be disputed that such is too frequently the case. Wherein, then, lies the error? For if it be an error, it is one that is shared by thousands of Protestants in the present day, who are constantly teaching that all controversy is evil; that doubt is sinful; that free inquiry inevitably leads to skepticism; and that he who would arrive at Truth, must do so by abasing his rational faculties, and by reading his Bible on his knees, rather than in his library; in the light of devotion, rather than in that of research; with the intellect at rest, rather than alert and quickened; with prayer, rather than with careful study.

The error lies in the supposition implied, rather than expressed, that devout submission and intellectual activity are somewhat opposed to each other; that the two cannot, if each be quickened, co-exist, the one being destructive of the other; and that consequently, free inquirers must, as a rule, be a *prayerless race*. But is it true that the intellect and the devout affections are

thus opposed? that research and prayer cannot really go on together?

The answer to the question must depend on the character of the prayer supposed to be offered. If, with some eminent modern divines, he regards the faith for which he entreats to be “a *new faculty*,” “a *Divine capacity*,” imparted only as a sovereign gift, it then follows, of course, that the more passive he is, the better; that creaturely activity, as it is sometimes called, is a hindrance to the reception of the divine blessing; and that prayer stands in direct opposition to the exercise of reason.

This has always been the doctrine of the Church of Rome. It manifests itself most in the most devout of her children. It is the distinguishing characteristic of the quietists and mystics in her communion of all ages; and it has always had a charm for devout Protestants of meditative temperament, who do not perceive the poison that it embodies. Protestants also, believing like the Romanists, that God requires them to pray and wait for a light above and beyond any that they can get by the use of their rational faculties, however much these may be disciplined by labor or purified by a right state of heart, try to lay aside reason, in order that they may passively receive from above “the truth as it is in Jesus.” They never consider that, from the course they are taking, they will necessarily be acted upon by forces, which, however divine they may deem them, are really as human as any by which they are in other ways affected.

But let us suppose another case. Let us suppose that the praying man expects his answer from God in another form; that he has not the slightest expectation of obtaining light apart from the vigorous use of his faculties; that as, when he asks God for daily bread, he only expects to receive it in the form of a blessing on his industry, his skill, his perseverance, and his trust in God; so, in spiritual things, if, when he prays that the eyes of his understanding may be opened, he expects his answer only in the form of that eye-salve (humility) with which the eye must be anointed, if it would see (Rev. 3:18,)—in the form of purification from the various phases of evil that darken and becloud the faculties of a sinful man; if he bear in mind the words of his Lord—“If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light;” if he look, therefore, for his answer in growing freedom from prejudice, in a greater breadth of charity, in a more loving appreciation of truth and goodness; and consequently (a necessary consequence,) through the reception of these “fruits of the Spirit,” to have a clearer intellect, a sounder judgment, a better balanced mind; the reverse of all we have stated then becomes true. Prayer and intellectual activity go on together, and as on the first supposition, they could not co-exist, so, on this, they cannot be separated.

But which is the true view?

For a reply we simply turn to the book and to the Master.

The Jews came to Christ with their doubts. What was his reply? Pray? No! It was, Search the Scriptures: they are they which testify of me. (John 5:39.) Again he said to them, "I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not. Why? Because ye do not pray? No! The cause of unbelief is thus stated, "How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor which cometh from God," (v. 44.) "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice, (John 18:37.)

Paul, at Thessalonica, when dealing with unbelievers, does not call upon them to pray; but "*as his manner was*, went in unto them and three sabbath days *reasoned* with them out of the Scriptures," (Acts 17:2.) So, again, at Corinth, "he *reasoned* in the synagogue every sabbath day, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks," (18:4.) Again at Ephesus, we are told "he entered into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." And so before Felix, he "*reasoned* of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come" till "Felix trembled." (24:25.)

Nor was his method different with believers. Complaining of some, that, when they "ought to have been teachers," it was needful to teach them "which be the first principles of the oracles of God," he adds, "Strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who, *by reason of use*, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil," (Heb. 5:14;) *i.e.*, their faculties exercised by practice in the distinguishing of truth from error.

How different in this particular was the conduct of the Apostle *before* his conversion. He then prayed and persecuted; while Stephen and other Christians, though ever living in the atmosphere of prayer, reasoned out of the Scriptures. Saul and the priests, like the popes, supplicated God and threatened man. Stephen the martyr studied, and quoted and followed the written Word. The persecutor would have nothing to do with controversy.

After his conversion, Paul, as we all know, became a great controversialist. Some of his epistles—that to the Galatians for example—are almost wholly controversial. *Before* his great change, we look in vain for a single argument against heresy; for then, like the Papal chief, he only "breathed out threatenings and slaughter." It was not till he became a Christian that he felt the necessity of giving "a reason for the hope that was in him," (Acts 17:2,17.)

Nowhere in Scripture, either from the lips of Christ or his Apostles, is prayer set before us as the medium by and through which divine light [truth] is to be obtained. Everywhere we are taught to pray for a right state of heart, for pardon, for purity, for temporal and eternal good, for friends, for enemies, for all men, for a blessing from above on faithful teachers of the Gospel; but *nowhere* for a new faculty, or that which amounts to the same thing. No such petition occurs in the prayer

Jesus taught his disciples. Would we know God's will we are to be babes, as distinguished from the wise and prudent of this world; we are to be obedient children; to seek for a renewed nature; for a wise and understanding heart; for a single eye; for the fear of God; and for strength and assistance in the fulfillment of every duty.

Far be it from us to deny that, *in one sense*—the true and scriptural sense—light from heaven is essential to all of us. Our ignorance is often felt to be oppressive, our perplexities so harassing, that it would be crushing indeed to one's spirit to feel that we were forbidden to pray for light. But not in the Pope's sense can we rightly do so. The light we need, and the light God warrants us to expect, is that of love and purity, freedom from pride, prejudice, self-interest, and sin—in short, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament we are taught to “cry after knowledge, and to lift up our voice for understanding, but it is in connection with seeking after it as the miner seeks for silver, by long and unwearied toil.

[Instructed by a careful study of the Word, light will come in by the removal of obstacles, and by increasing faith in God's promises. Thus, the eyes of our understanding being opened, we may comprehend with all saints more of the height and depth, the length and breadth of God's love as exhibited in his plan and Word.—Ed.]

Paul prayed for his converts, that the word of Christ might dwell in them richly, (Col. 3:16;) that they might hold fast

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that which is good, (1 Thes. 5:21;) that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, (Col. 1:9,10;) but all these petitions are but so many forms of desire for their sanctification, for increase of grace, and for the planting within them of holy principles and dispositions. In not a single instance does he direct them to pray for such blessings as direct gifts from heaven; but always to watch, to search, to be faithful to duty, to love truth, and to follow it at all risks, not doubting but that in this path they would find it.

We have said nothing as to the danger of praying over the Bible, with the unconscious desire to find ourselves right. Yet nothing is more common; and it is certain that he who does so, will generally succeed in obtaining the object of his wishes. It is the same with Philosophy. If you have a strong *wish* to find phenomena such as to confirm the conjectures you have formed, and allow that wish to bias your examination, you are ill-fitted for interrogating nature. So it is with the Bible. Revelation is to be interrogated not as a witness but as an instructor.

What, then, do we learn from the whole? We learn that *in the acquisition of truth*, prayer occupies precisely the same position that it does in relation to the acquisition of bread; that as God *now* showers not bread from heaven as he did in the wilderness, so he showers not truth upon our minds as he did upon the Apostles. And in each case for the same reason, because it is not requisite. The laborer has now what the Israelite in the desert had not,—the opportunity of gaining his bread by the sweat of his face; and *the Christian has now* what the Christian in apostolic days had not—a complete revelation of the will of God in his hand, and nothing to hinder his understanding of it as it becomes due, save his worldliness, selfishness, and sin.

For the removal of these hindrances let us pray and labor earnestly, assured that only so far as they are supplanted by the Holy Spirit of God shall we be able to discern wondrous things in the Divine Law. H. DUNN.

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— August, 1884 —



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