

The Church in Earnest

by John Angell James

A revival in piety is necessary for the church to experience a deeper sense of the love of Christ, a fervent consecration of the heart to the services of piety, and a settled delight in the law of God.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Malachi 3:10, Matthew 7:7, Galatians 5:16, James 4:8

Topics: "Revival Of Piety", "Personal Sanctification"

Description

John Angell James preaches a pastoral letter on the revival of piety, emphasizing the need for a greater increase in true piety among sincere Christians and the conversion of more souls to God. He challenges the church to recognize the necessity of a revival, pointing out the dangers of lukewarmness and the importance of seeking higher spiritual attainments. James highlights the prevalence of zeal based on wrong motives and the need for a purification of zeal through personal piety. He urges individuals to examine their own hearts, repent of sin, and cultivate a fervent devotion to God, emphasizing the essential role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about a true revival of piety.

Transcript

A PASTORAL LETTER ON REVIVAL IN PIETY

Addressed primarily to the church of Christ assembling in Carrs Lane, Birmingham, and submitted to the consideration of the Independent Churches in general.

The Author of the following Epistle intended, originally, to print it exclusively for the use of his own Flock; a circumstance which will account for the form of address which he has employed--subsequent reflection led him to conclude, that if it be adapted in any measure to do them good, it may be of service to the members of other churches. With the hope, therefore, of maintaining and guiding the public feeling, which has been so happily excited on the subject of Revivals, he now offers it to the consideration of the denomination to which he belongs.

December 15, 1828.

My much beloved flock,

By a revival of piety, I mean a greater increase of true piety in those who are already sincere Christians, and a larger addition to the number of those who are truly converted to God, than we have been accustomed to witness; or, referring to the efficient cause of it, it may be defined, such an effusion of the

influence of the Holy Spirit, as shall lead on those who believe in Jesus Christ, and are regenerated by Divine grace, to much higher attainments in spiritual religion, and shall at the time greatly augment the number of the righteous. That is what I mean by a revival, a great and rapid increase of true piety in our churches.

We must give up at once, all idea that our circumstances preclude the hope of an increase of our spiritual and devotional habits; such an apprehension stands in the way of our enjoying the benefit; for he that shuts the door of hope, closes the very avenue through which the blessing comes.

But here, perhaps, a question will arise, "Do we need a revival?" Rarely is the spiritual condition of any church, or in any age, such as to admit of no improvement. Piety, like everything else, admits of indefinite progression. The most heavenly-minded man on earth is far below the spirits of the just made perfect--and the most pure and prosperous church may be, and should be, still more pure and prosperous than it is. Surely, then, it may be admitted that we have need of a revival. I do not mean that you, my dear flock, are more dull and lukewarm than other churches; I do not wish to have it thought that your state is behind that of your contemporary churches; what I mean is, that the state of all our Christian societies is such as to call loudly for attempts to promote an increase of true piety.

I am willing to admit, that, in some views of the present state of our churches, it would appear as if real piety were rapidly increasing in this age. The public spirit displayed in support of pious institutions, is a pleasing sign, and unquestionably proves that there must be a considerable portion of real and active piety in operation. But this is a symptom which must be viewed with some discrimination. A great deal of zeal may rest upon a narrow basis of true godliness. I am afraid that only a very small part of what is now done for the cause of God, is done from right motives. The mere force of example, or the love of activity, or a selfish regard to the honor of ourselves and our denomination, will account, perhaps, for more than a half of what is done for the diffusion of truth. There is great danger of deluding ourselves, both as it respects the state of piety generally, and the condition of our own hearts, by merely looking at what is being done for the spread of the gospel at home and abroad.

It is an easy, and a very gratifying substitution, to put 'zeal' in the place of the severer and more self-denying duties of faith and charity. I am very far from wishing to have zeal diminished--but am anxious to have it purified and rendered more efficacious, by a larger admixture of personal piety. I would not have a shilling abstracted from the funds of Missionary, Bible, or Tract Societies; but I feel tremblingly solicitous, that piety should not droop in the shadow of these glorious associations. It is the desire of Satan to turn our very good into an occasion of evil--and to render even the instruments by which we destroy his kingdom, the indirect means of enfeebling our own strength. If our societies be an occasion of pride, vanity, and self-delight; or if they draw off our attention from the duties of the closet, or the state of the heart, they may, by such a perversion, be made to corrupt our own minds.

I will also concede that there are other favorable signs in the present day. Piety is most undoubtedly spreading, and I give God continual thanks for it, within the pale of the Church of England. The increase of truly pious, devoted, and laborious clergymen, is astonishing, and can be accounted for only on the ground of an extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to doubt whether the preaching of so many enlightened and holy men is attended with great success. I am of opinion that a revival of a very decisive character, and to a very wide extent, is now going on in the Establishment--and that in innumerable places, the fire that burns upon her altars, sends up a flame of peculiar intensity and brightness.

Nor are there lacking, in our dissenting churches, proofs of the presence and the power of Him, who "walks amidst the golden candlesticks." The number of our churches, as well as the numbers in them, is upon the increase. Still, however, I must express to you, my dear people, my apprehension, that the degree of our individual and personal piety is far less than what it ought to be, or what it might be. We have much cause for thankfulness, I admit--but still more cause for humiliation. Instead of looking round with delight upon our situation, and supposing that all is well, we should look round with grief and abasement, and lament over our low estate.

Let us advert to the number of real conversions which take place among us--and in order to judge of these, we must take into account the means of pious instruction which are employed. Let us recollect that it is God's own truth that is preached, and that the preaching of it is God's own institute. Our ministers, generally, are men of energy; their sermons numerous, and their labor great. In addition, how much instruction is delivered in our Sunday-schools! how many Bibles and tracts are distributed! and how much conversation is held with the poor, in their own habitations! And yet, where is the proportionate result? How few of our most awakening sermons produce any permanent impression! How few are persuaded by the terrors of the Lord, or drawn by the attraction of the cross! How comparatively rare is it, for a sinner to be converted from the error of his ways, and a soul saved from death.

Now and then, indeed, we do hear of such happy effects; sometimes our hearts are gladdened by the conversion of formalists or profligates--but how few are these cases, compared with the instances of neglect and indifference which prevail among mankind! Where do we hear of, or see anything the most distantly approaching to that general solicitude described by President Edwards, as having been exhibited at Northampton? When do your ministers tell you of anxious inquirers after salvation flocking to their houses, to be led into the way of life? When do you see twenty, thirty, fifty, new communicants coming at one time to the table of the Lord, as is frequently now the case in America? Where do we hear of that stir about eternal things, which is manifested by multitudes at once in that favored land? Is there anything in our churches, which can be called, in the language of prophecy, "a shaking among the dry bones in the valley"? Alas! alas! does not the stillness of death prevail over the motionless skeletons? Do not the messengers return from the scene of moral desolation, venting their lament in the words of the seer of antiquity, "Who has believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" Do you say that we need no revival, when, on the days of the administration of the Lord's Supper, you see the multitude rise and retire, and only the few, the very few, gather round the emblems of the Savior's body and blood?

But I come now to the state of piety in your own hearts. Is this what it should be? Is it so lively, so vigorous, so elevated, that it needs no accession of strength? Consider, my dear flock, what our profession amounts to, what our principles are, what our creed includes. We believe that we are immortal creatures, going on to eternity, and that we shall exist through everlasting ages in inconceivable torment or felicity; that we are sinners by nature and practice against God--and as such, under the sentence of the divine law, which sentence is eternal death, an everlasting sense and endurance of the wrath of God; that we have been delivered from our state of condemnation through the sovereign, rich, and efficacious grace of God, granted to us through the mediation of Jesus Christ; that we are pardoned, and in a state of favor with Jehovah; that we are going on to glory, honor, immortality, and eternal life, and shall dwell forever with Christ and his saints and angels, in glory everlasting; that we are redeemed by Jesus Christ and purified from iniquity to be a peculiar people, zealous for good works, and designed to show forth the praise of God by the beauties of holiness.

Are not these our principles and profession? Think, then, what kind of people ought we to be, in all holy conversation and godliness; how dead to the world, caring but little about its profits and losses, its pains and pleasures; how heavenly in our anticipations and aspirations; how spiritual in our thoughts and feelings; how devotional in our habits; how self-denying in all our gratifications; how fond of the Holy Scriptures, and devoted to the perusal of them; how given to meditation and contemplation, to private prayer and self-communion; how devoted to communion with God, and how impressed with a sense of the unutterable, inconceivable love of Christ; how replete with love to our brethren, and benevolence to the whole family of man!

Should it not be seen by others, as well as felt by ourselves, that we look not at the things which are seen and temporal--but at the things which are unseen and eternal? that our eye, our hope, our heart, are upon eternity? Ought we not to possess feelings so fervent, and to exhibit conduct so decided, as to an ordinary spectator should put on something, in his estimation, of the character of enthusiasm? Should there not be a fervid consecration of the heart to the services of piety; a settled delight in the law of God, with an abiding contrition of spirit, produced by a feeling of heinous delinquency in the sight of God, "though mellowed by an apprehension of divine mercy through Christ?"

But is this, indeed, our state, or the state of Christians in general? Do they indeed live the life of that faith, and painful mortification, and habitual restraint, and aspiring spirituality, and heavenly-mindedness, which are so often inculcated in the Word of God, as the very essence of vital and experimental Christianity? What do we know in this age, when profession is easy and piety generally safe from persecution, of days spent in prayer and fasting, and nights in watchfulness; of crucifying the flesh, and wrestling with God in strong cryings and many tears? We abstain from immoralities, and public amusements, and from many private engagements which are the symbols of love to the world--and to these things we add an attendance upon an evangelical ministry, and the forms of domestic and private piety--and all this so far is well. But as to the real culture of the heart; the mortification of the corrupt and earthly affections of the soul; the deep sense of the love of Christ; the withdrawal of our affections from the world, to set them on things above; the high communing of our spirits with God; the blissful anticipation of an eternity to be spent with the Lord Jesus; the conflicts and the triumphs of the fight of faith; of these things, alas! we know little but the names, and are ready, in some cases, to wonder what they mean. Yet are they all continually alluded to in the Scriptures, and set forth in the experience of those of God's saints whose memoirs we so often read.

I am well convinced that the piety of the present day is a languid and feeble plant, it has run up to a great height, perhaps, under the influence of a long season of unclouded sunshine; but it lacks depth and tenacity of root, strength of stem, and abundance of fruit--and that, were the wintry season and frosty nights of persecution again to return, it would droop its head, and shed its leaves, and give full proof of its sickly and delicate constitution.

It is greatly to be feared, that in these times of peace and prosperity in the church, many have entered her gates, and joined her fellowship, who know nothing at all of spiritual religion, and whose example and spirit exert a deadening influence upon others. No fiery ordeal is now to be passed, which puts a man's sincerity to the test. "A profession of piety has ceased to be persecuted, and has even become respectable. Instead of sinking a man into ignominy, it in many cases raises him to honor. The transforming efficacy of the Gospel is rising, as it were, from the under current of society, and beginning to appear on its glittering surface." In such a state of things, how many are with us, who are not of us! Alas! for themselves, they are the most hopeless of all characters; though in the center of the kingdom of heaven, they are, in another

sense, further from it than all others. They have mistaken membership for Christianity, a dreadful error, inasmuch as it closes all the avenues of conviction, and places a man in a situation where his salvation is all but impossible. He has been recognized as a Christian; has received, as he thinks, a certificate of personal piety from a Christian society--and now sleeps upon his heartless profession so securely, that nothing can awaken him--but the sounds of the infernal world, on which he is driven by his dreadful delusion. Such members, my dear friends, are to be found in all our churches--and they produce a deadening influence on the piety of others--and against this influence, we should be upon our guard, and most vigilantly watch.

But I am particularly anxious to place before you, what is necessary, in order to obtain a general revival of piety among us.

I. We must have ever a deep conviction that we NEED a revival in piety. For if we are satisfied with our state, and think it good enough; if, like the members of the church at Laodicea, we suppose that we are rich, and increasing in goods, and have need of nothing; we shall of course take no pains to improve. And can we doubt of this necessity? Especially can those of you doubt it; for some such, we fear, there are, who have little else of religion left them but its mere forms; who have lost the spirit of prayer, and have almost discontinued even the exercise itself; who have no relish for the word of God; no pleasure in the public means of grace; no pious affections, no penitence, no gratitude, no love? Can you doubt the need of a revival? Are not you the strongest proofs of this necessity?

II. We must DESIRE a revival in piety. For what we do not desire, we shall not seek. We must not only desire it--but long for it, intensely long for it. The reasons for this must present themselves to our attention in a very impressive, important, and attractive form, so as to engage and deeply interest our hearts. Our own eternal salvation must appear to be closely connected with it, so that we may become anxious and alarmed about our everlasting happiness; a declining piety leads to open backsliding, and backsliding to apostasy. We should consider ourselves as in imminent danger, as likely to lose our souls, and to fall into eternal perdition, if we continue in a lukewarm state. We should be therefore led to tremble with great fear for our own safety. And if matters were not so dangerous, yet how desirable is it that we should be led on to a fuller influence, a richer enjoyment, a happier experience of divine things. How much is it to be longed for, that we should have a stronger faith, a livelier hope; that we should rejoice in the Lord always, with a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory; that we should go on amidst the various trials of life with a peace that passes understanding; that we should have the spirit of adoption, the witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God, the full assurance of hope; that we should daily commune with God, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God!

How much is this to be coveted, in the place of that poor, feeble, heartless piety, which we possess! How much is it to be desired for our own comfort; for our work as professing Christians; for our usefulness; for the glory of God! And if it be desirable for us, it is equally so for our fellow Christians. What lights, in our dark world, would our churches be, if they were composed of truly spiritual members. How would the beauties of holiness shine forth from such churches! What a spiritual force would they contain and exert! what notice would they attract! what prayers would ascend from them to God, and what love would go from them towards man! How much of contention would cease, and how much of charity would prevail! Then would Zion "put on her beautiful garments, and shine forth in all her loveliness, fair as the moon and bright as the sun."

And then how important is this revival for the welfare of others. How desirable is a more extended work of conversion! How precious are immortal souls! how infinitely momentous their salvation! The conversion of infidels, the reformation of profligates, the regeneration of formalists--oh, how ardently to be longed for! It is impossible to be ignorant that great numbers are perishing all around us! Where is our compassion, where our zeal, our pity--if we are not concerned for the conversion of souls? We profess to believe, that, without repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, men must be eternally lost. And do we not see multitudes around us without these pre-requisites to salvation? Can we be indifferent to this matter? If God were to pour out his Spirit from on high, how many of these would be saved, how many of our neighbors, friends, relations, children, might receive the gift of eternal life! What a blissful sight would it be to witness a more general concern about piety; to see men flocking to Christ, "as doves to their windows," to hear from multitudes the cry of anxious inquiry, "What shall I do to be saved?" to see sinners converted from the error of their ways, and their souls saved from death! Picture to yourselves, my dear friends, the scene of twenty, thirty, forty, fifty new converts, at one time, led into the fellowship of the church; what glory to God, what happiness to man, what benefit to society, what triumphs of piety, would be the result! Look at a revival, such as President Edwards describes, and ask if it is not every way desirable.

III. We must be convinced that the blessing can come only from God; that it can only be produced by the influence of the Holy Spirit. A deep conviction of man's helplessness and dependence must be at the bottom of all we do to bring about a revival. We must be entirely persuaded of the great truth, that "Paul may plant, and Apollos water--but that it is God alone who can give the increase!" that it is "God who works in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure." We must take up the doctrine of the necessity of divine influence to renew and sanctify the human heart, not as a mere article of faith--but as a practical principle; not as an apology for indolence--but as at once an encouragement and a stimulus to exertion, as an incitement to prayer, a basis of hope, a motive to activity. We must understand the doctrine, believe it, act upon it. All eyes, and hearts, and hopes, must go up to the Eternal Spirit, the fountain of light, and life, and love.

And we must not only feel the need of the Spirit--but the encouragement we have to ask it; we must believe that we are, in a very especial sense, under the dispensation of the Spirit; that we have the promise of the Spirit; that it is our own fault if we are not "filled with the Spirit." God, in the bestowing of this gift, is sovereign--but not arbitrary; he gives it to none because they have deserved it, therefore it is in every case unmerited; he has promised it to all who seek it aright, and therefore all may have it. If we have it not, it is because we ask not, or asking, ask amiss. In looking for the Spirit, we are not to sit down in indolence, and wait without seeking; the analogy between the material and the spiritual rain will not, in this particular, hold good. We are no where commanded to have rain, to be filled with rain; but we are commanded to have the Spirit, and to be filled with it, plainly intimating that, however mysterious the connection, there is a connection, in this case, between the means and the end.

But what are the MEANS to be employed to obtain the Spirit? Some of these are to be engaged in by the churches, in their collective capacity; such as seasons of solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer, specially set apart, in addition to the ordinary times of our social devotions. If we look into the New Testament, and observe the practice of the Apostles, we shall find that special occasions led to special seasons of prayer. What is customary, generally becomes dull; formality is the usual result of stated forms. We all need something, even in reference to piety itself, to vary the sameness of regularly returning exercises. Who has not felt the need of this in application to personal piety and closet devotion, and experienced the

reviving influence of an hour, an evening, or a day, set apart for extraordinary devotion? And may it not be expected that churches should feel the same influence from such seasons? How much solemnity generally pervades such meetings! All seem called upon to humble themselves afresh before God; afresh to devote themselves to his service--and afresh to seek his blessing upon the church.

And the solemnity would be much increased by the addition of fasting. Why is it, that fasting is so much neglected in modern times, as to be almost laid aside? Only because we have sunk into a religion which loves ease, and which excludes all that is self-denying and rigorous. Did not our Lord, in his sermon upon the Mount, take it for granted that his disciples did fast, though in a way less ostentatious than the Pharisees? Did he not himself fast forty days in the wilderness? Did not the Apostles frequently observe the custom? Has not the church, in every age until the present, considered it as a Christian duty? Is it not a dictate of nature, as well as a duty of piety--and thus justified by reason, as well as sanctioned by revelation?

For what is fasting, and what is its design? It is a practice to be observed in seasons of solemn humiliation and confession of sin, when the soul is supposed to be so much grieved, affected, and impressed, on account of guilt, as to have little inclination for the ordinary gratifications of appetite. In great grief, such gratifications are not only unsuitable--but undesired. Who, in deep grief, is inclined to go to a feast? Fasting is intended both to express and to aid inward humiliation. It is the conformity of the state of the outward--to that of the inward man. It is the communion of the body with the soul, in the act of abasement and self-mortification. Total abstinence from all food is not necessary, for this would rather impede than aid devotion; but surely on seasons of solemn and extraordinary prayer, an abstinence from our usual and lawful indulgences of appetite is suitable and necessary. Such fasts should be observed by individuals in reference to their own personal piety, and by pious gatherings in their collective capacity. All churches have, in one age or another, admitted this. The Christian churches in America are exemplary in their observance of this custom, and why should not we? Special seasons of solemn prayer at which assembled churches unite in fervent supplication to God for the outpouring of the Spirit and the revival of piety, are singularly calculated to affect the mind with the importance of the subject, and to produce a very deep impression in reference to it. Let all the members, therefore, make a point of being present on such occasions, and let them go in the most devout and spiritual manner, as to a business of uncommon solemnity.

But still, these public meetings of the church are of themselves not sufficient to produce the desired end. If the matter stops here, little will be done. Nothing more will, in this case, result, than a mere temporary excitement and stir; a feeling which, however solemn or affecting at the time, will be but transient, and die away with the occasion during which it is wrought up. Hence many people, aware that the excitement produced by such means seldom lasts long, consider them of no great consequence, and do not give them their attendance or encouragement. This conduct would be less unreasonable if such solemnities were designed to operate to the exclusion of all other methods, and were not intended to originate there. Their object is, in fact, not to supersede--but to lead to, individual concern and improvement.

The church is called together to humble itself, to confess its sins, to lament its lukewarm state, and to pray for the effusion of the Spirit, in order that each individual member may thus have the subject brought home with greater effect upon his own heart and conscience by the weight and influence of the whole body. It is the expostulation and admonition of the community--to every single member of it. I am afraid, and indeed jealous with a godly jealousy, lest all the present stir and solicitude should terminate in mere public meetings, and seasons of collective earnestness and prayer, without its being followed up by individuals in

private.

1. Permit me, then, my dear friends, to remind you that you must seek the revival of piety generally, in the way of your own PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT. You must say each for himself, "I need to be revived, and must begin with myself. My piety is at a low ebb, and I am desirous, for myself, to partake of a larger measure of the Spirit's influence." We must not lose sight of ourselves in looking at the church generally. We must not forget that we are parts of the community--and that if the society is to be revived, it must be by the revival of its individual members. We must not be looking about, saying, "Where, and how, and when, will the work begin?" but should say, "It is to begin now, with us, and by our increased attention to all that enters into the essence of vital godliness."

In this sense of the words, we may remark, "that the kingdom of God comes not with observation." Each may say, "I am an Achan who troubles the camp--or one who intercedes for the people, and blesses them." And we should each act as if the interests of the church depended upon our own spiritual condition. Yes; it is this individuality of feeling, it is this attempt of each one to seek the revival of his own piety, that will bring on the glorious awakening that we desire. And we must each seek this personal improvement, at all risks, and hazards, and costs. If we would increase in holiness, we should pray, "O God, let my soul prosper and be in health, at all events! Improve my personal piety, my Christian temperament and spirit, though it be at the sacrifice of my temporal comfort. Supply my deficiencies, mortify my corruptions, increase my spirituality, and enkindle in my heart the flame of holy love, though it be necessary, in order to accomplish this purpose, to diminish my worldly ease and enjoyments." Ah! are we prepared to say this? Are we prepared to set up personal piety, as that one grand paramount concern to which all things must be brought into subjection? Do we remember what we ask for, when we ask for growth in grace, and consider that God may answer us by solemn things in righteousness?

2. If we would be revived in piety, we must resist by faith the encroaching influence of the WORLD, and the engrossing power of seen and temporal things. The address to the church of Laodicea would lead one to suppose that it was a place of trade--and that trade had produced riches--and riches had produced pride, worldly-mindedness, love of ease, indifference to divine things, and spiritual poverty. Britain, like Laodicea, is a place of trade, and trade is producing the same effects here as it did there--and if there be any people in the world to whom the counsel of Laodicea is applicable rather than to others--it seems to be, the churches in Britain.

Most people in our country appear inordinately intent upon the world. To be rich, or at least to be comfortable, to be reputable, to be genteel, to be fashionable, to live in larger houses, and to have finer furniture and more earthly things than others--seems to be the supreme concern of most. They must, whether they can afford it or not, vie with their neighbors in all their habits. This seems to be the rage of the present day--and the church of God is, in a measure, carried away by the delusion. Many seem almost without knowing it to be possessed by a grasping at things beyond their reach, and an ambitious aspiring at some undefinable point of worldly elevation. All their time, all their attention, is absorbed, and all the vigor of their spirits is exhausted, in this panting race after the world's possessions and comforts! It is evident that, until this disposition be more subdued than it is, until our moderation be more known to all men, until we have lowered our estimate of the importance of wealth, until we have ceased thus to mind earthly things, until we have gained a greater victory over the world, or are anxious to gain it--our piety cannot be revived. It is like seed growing amidst thorns--and though a fertile shower and a warmer sun should cause it to spring afresh during a more than ordinarily genial season--yet it is still among thorns, which will be sure to choke the grain.

I am afraid that we have not that simplicity of taste, that contentment, that moral courage to be indifferent to the world's opinion; that sobriety of mind, that comparative unconcernedness about finery and splendor, which are necessary to prepare us for a high state of piety. Let us, then, consider this matter, let us attend to the apostolic admonition, "Be not conformed to this world--but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of the Lord." The spirit of the world, and the spirit of piety, cannot dwell together in the same bosom. "You cannot serve God and Mammon." "If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Seek them not!" "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth," so much as treasures in heaven. Remember that "one thing is needful!" "Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things that he has."

But if we will be rich, if we will be anxious about many things, if we will be full of worldly ambition, and covetousness, and earthly mindedness--then we cannot experience much revival in piety, and need not add hypocrisy to lukewarmness! For very little better than a hypocrite is the man who attends meetings to pray for the effusions of the Holy Spirit--and yet will not moderate his extreme concern after worldly wealth.

3. If we are in a state of DECLENSION, let us inquire whether any particular cause has produced this effect, and retrace our steps. "Remember from whence you are fallen," was the counsel delivered by our Lord to one of the ancient churches--and it was immediately added, "and repent and do your first works."

Perhaps there has been an habitual neglect of the WORD OF GOD. In all declensions in the church of God, a neglect of the Scriptures has been the root of them. On the contrary, in all seasons of revival and reformation, the Scriptures have been the grand means of their being brought about. There are several ways in which a lack of proper regard to God's word is discovered; such as a neglecting to read, meditate, and pray over it; not reading it for the ends and purposes for which it was written; forming a low opinion of the importance of the truths it contains. If this be the case, and I am afraid it is very generally the case, let us seek a revival of piety by a revived attention to the Scriptures. The Bible is in great danger of being neglected for periodical publications, reports of religious institutions, fashionable poetry, popular tales, and works of even questionable propriety. The Bible is the great reformer and reviver of piety--it is the instrument which the Spirit employs. Perhaps the Bible was never less read, in comparison with the talk about it, than it is now. Our piety must breathe the air of Scriptural revelation, or it cannot be invigorated. We must read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, the word of God. We must meditate more, we must read more, as upon our knees. We must read for the sake of devotion, spirituality, sanctification, comfort--and not merely for curiosity and controversy.

Perhaps we have declined in piety through neglect of PRIVATE PRAYER, and have taken the time once devoted to retirement--and given it to business, domestic comfort, or personal gratification--and have abridged the season, and lost the spirit of prayer, until our closet exercises have become mere dull, cold, heartless forms, which we observe just as we retire to rest, or rise from our bed. We no longer, probably, go into our closet "to commune with our Father who sees in secret." Or if we still keep up the habit of stated seasons of retirement, perhaps there is much that is wrong in our manner of performing the duty.

"When we pray, do we really and earnestly desire what we ask for? Do we merely use words--or are our hearts engaged? Do we watch unto prayer--looking and waiting for an answer? Are we not apt to be less earnest in matters wherein we should take no denial--than in others wherein it behooves us to be submissive? Do we not feel languid and formal in asking for spiritual blessings--and reserve the energy of

our souls for temporal deliverances? When we pray for good things--is it always for a good end? When we confess our sins and pray to be restored--do we really lament them, and mean to forsake them? When we pray for divine direction in matters of faith or practice--are we sincerely determined to follow the dictates of God's word? Are we not greatly lacking in what may be called pious public spirit in our prayers? Do we ask blessings wholly in the name of Christ--for his sake?"

Now let us examine ourselves, let us look back upon our habits of prayer, and try them by these tests. If we have become slack in this duty, no wonder piety has declined in our souls! The spirit of prayer is the very essence of piety! If we would be revived, we must renew this holy and delightful exercise. We must renew the habits of communion with God. We must have our stated seasons of retirement, and regularly observe them. We must seek to have the holy fire of devotion rekindled upon the altar of private prayer. We must be much in prayer, and "pray always with all prayer and supplication," and wrestle in prayer. And the great object of our prayers must be the revival of our own piety and the piety of our church--and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon unconverted sinners in general. Day and night we must cry to God with intense earnestness for the effusion of his grace. It must be an object on which we set our hearts, and for which we breathe out our longings to Him, who alone can gratify our desires, and give us our requests.

Another circumstance, which often occasions deadness and declension in personal piety is, that of SIN LYING ON THE CONSCIENCE UNLAMENTED. If there be any particular evil to which we have been addicted, and that evil is still persisted in--we may be certain that we have not lamented it sufficiently, or to any good purpose. Or, if we are refraining from it merely from prudential considerations, and not from hatred of the thing itself; or, if we have accumulated much guilt upon our consciences by smaller sins, secret faults, or minor imperfections, without being affected by a spirit of penitence; or, if we remember past evils with pleasure and approbation; or do not confess, abhor, and reject them--such a state of mind as this, must necessarily weaken and enervate our graces, cut us off from communion with God, give Satan an advantage over us, and lead to habitual lukewarmness, if not to open apostacy! Tenderness of conscience, and a habitual contrition of heart, are essential to a high degree of spiritual prosperity.

All of the above things must receive our most serious attention--if we would have among us a real revival of piety, and not the mere name of one; if we are anxious that the present stir and excitement should not end in mere talk--but in a permanent improvement of the state of our churches

4. We must remove all STUMBLING-BLOCKS out of the way. The language of the prophet should be attended to, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way." Now, there are many things which, if not removed, will hinder the work that we are anxious to see going on among us.

All contentions must cease; not only such as affect and divide the church generally, for blessed be the God of peace, my dear brethren, we have none of these; but all such as exist in private, and alienate the mind of one brother from another. Wherever two Christians are living in a state of enmity or estrangement, there is an obstacle to a revival. If we grieve the Holy Spirit, which we do when we indulge in anger, wrath, envy, malice, revenge; or when we cherish unkind thoughts, and use uncharitable language towards each other; this celestial guest cannot be expected to visit us with the extraordinary tokens of his presence.

"The irascible passions surround the church with a sort of turbulent atmosphere than which nothing is more opposite to that calm and holy light in which the Spirit loves to dwell." "Christ," says Edwards, "appears, as it were, coming in his kingdom, which calls for great moderation in our behavior towards all

men. The awe of the Divine Majesty that appears present or approaching, should dispose us to it, and deter us from the contrary. For us to be judging one another, and behaving with bitterness and fierceness towards one another, when he who is the searcher of all hearts appears so remarkably present, is exceedingly unsuitable. Our business at such a time should be at home, searching and condemning ourselves, and taking heed to our own behavior. If there be glorious prosperity to the church of God approaching, those who are the most meek will have the largest share in it." It is the prevalence of a spirit of love, that will prepare us for a time of great awakening among those who know not God.

We must also put away our worldly-mindedness, our ambition, our excessive concern to be conformed, as far as possible, to the showy, expensive, and luxurious habits of the people of this world. We must restrain our taste for voluptuous ease, and extravagance and self-indulgence; we must give up our concern to be accounted fashionable and genteel. Instead of which, we must, without being contemptible or antiquated, be simple economical and self-denying, that we may have the more to give to the cause of humanity and piety. Our calling, as Christians, is to holiness and mercy. We must aim to do good, and consider benevolence as our very vocation.

We must give up, also, our sinful shame and cowardice, our fear of the world's sneer, our dread of ridicule, our painful fear of reproach and censure. Tenderly sensitive to everything that affects our moral character, we must be utterly indifferent to everything else. We must be content to bear the charge of fanaticism, enthusiasm, and hypocrisy. We must prepare to be thought weak-minded visionaries, and be utterly regardless of the contempt thrown on our understanding, by those who neither know us nor the Scriptures.

If we would have the presence and the power of Christ among us, we must have his cross too; for if we are ashamed or afraid of his cross, he will not come to us in power. A real revival of piety will expose us to flippant, ignorant, and ill-natured remarks--and cowardly shame of these things will unquestionably keep away the benefits.

5. We must be very diligent in our attendance upon all the public means of grace. Our Sunday services must be most diligently, and even anxiously, improved. Instead of satisfying ourselves with one service on the Lord's day, as is the case with many professors, we must at least go twice to the house of God--and if we have not conveniences for carrying our families there, we must not go to such a distance from the place of worship, that in bad weather they are prevented from going at all, and in fine weather from going more than once. If our pious enjoyment and improvement be thus sacrificed to the 'love of ease', how can we expect the influence of the Spirit in any large measure? There is an evil creeping into, and spreading through, our pious societies, of a very serious nature, which, if it be not checked, will disappoint all our hopes of revival. I mean this practice of partial neglect of the public means of grace, this habit of going to such a distance from the house of God, as to prevent a constant and frequent attendance upon its public services.

Week-day services are also, by this means, almost entirely given up by many. And there are some, who live in the neglect of these services, without even the excuse of distance for the omission. Can we expect the blessing we seek, if we do not avail ourselves of every suitable opportunity to obtain it? Is not a prayer-meeting, a week-day sermon, eminently calculated to perpetuate and keep alive the impressions produced on Sunday, and to maintain, amidst the urgency of worldly cares, a sense of piety upon the mind? Do we not need constantly returning admonitions, frequently repeated helps to keep up our regard to eternal and unseen things? Let us then be found in our places, as far as a due attention to other duties will allow, on these week-day services. Let us make no voluntary engagements of pleasure or visiting for

those evenings--but consider them as sacred to our souls' concerns.

The Quakers, who are by no means deficient in attention to the duties of their worldly calling, spend an hour every Wednesday morning at a pious meeting, and thus redeem one of the most valuable portions of the day from the things that are seen and temporal--to devote it to the things that are unseen and eternal. In the Church of England, all cathedral churches have religious service twice every day--and morning prayers are also read in many churches every day, and in others, two days in a week, a practice founded on the supposition, that we need all possible helps to devotion from public worship, and need them during the week, as well as on Sunday. It is quite vain for us to look for any improvement in our habits of pious feeling, unless we are prepared to give ourselves to the means likely to produce it. We must awaken from our sleep, we must throw aside our sloth, we must employ the diligence which we observe in the man whose determination it is to be rich--for it is thus only we have any right or reason to look for a growth in grace.

6. In order to obtain this revival, as it respects the more frequent and numerous conversions of sinners, there must be a general effort to obtain it. In this great work, there is something for all to do. Here is room for all, and a demand upon all. None of the friends of Zion, whether in a public or a private situation, should stand by as idle spectators. Ministers, of course, must take the lead. It belongs to them in virtue of their office, calling, and vows. We should be tremblingly anxious to encourage and promote the work of evangelism, by every means in our power. We should first seek an enlarged measure of divine influence upon our own souls. We need a double portion of the Spirit of God at such a time as this.

"We need to be as full of light as a glass that is held out in the sun--and with respect to love and zeal, we need to be like the angels, who are as flames of fire. The state of the times extremely requires a fullness of the divine Spirit in ministers, and we ought to give ourselves no rest until we have obtained it. And, in order to this, I think that we, above all people, should give ourselves to fasting and prayer, both in secret and one with another."

We should also promote this work in every possible way--by preaching about it; speaking of it in our church meetings; conversing with our friends in reference to it; instituting special seasons for public prayer; reading suitable accounts to our churches of revivals in other places, especially Mr. Edwards's account of the work in New England, and the modern statements from America; diligently and seriously catechising the children in our congregations; appointing meetings for the encouragement and direction of people under pious concern--and by every other means which a holy ingenuity can devise. Our responsibility, just now, is solemn indeed. Our churches are in a crisis, and can we be indifferent?

The Deacons and more influential members of our churches, should come forward and give all their assistance to the work. Instead of standing by with cold indifference or skeptical hesitation, they should do all they can in the way of ready and judicious activity. They should animate their brethren by their example, and stimulate them by their conversation. They should endeavor to be present at all meetings for prayer, and render it manifest that they attach great importance to the work.

Parents should give themselves with renewed zeal to the work of domestic piety, and labor with fresh vigor to train up their children and servants in the fear of the Lord. There must be a revival in domestic piety. Family prayer must be performed with greater punctuality, constancy, fervor, and solemnity--and the fire of devotion kindled afresh upon the altar in the house, as well as in the closet.

Sunday-school teachers must have a deeper impression of their obligations to seek the spiritual welfare of their youthful charge, a more solemn sense of their accountability, and a more ardent zeal for their success. They must consider, that the salvation of the souls of the children is the highest end of their office, and leave no effort untried to accomplish it. They must be anxious to see a revival of piety in the scene of their labors, and among the objects of their solicitude. And, for their encouragement, they should be informed, that the great work which God is doing in America, may be traced up, in a great measure, to the Bible classes in the Sunday schools--and the same remark applies to the extraordinary awakenings which have taken place in Wales. If all Sunday-school teachers were qualified for their work, and wholly devoted to its spiritual objects, a wonderful change might be looked for in the pious state of this country, through their instrumentality. They, by their instruction, prepare the children to hear the ministers of piety with greater edification.

Business owners may do much, by discouraging vice in their establishments; by establishing libraries of suitable books, to be read by their workmen at their own homes; by encouraging their attendance upon public worship; by occasionally admonishing them to fear God--and, above all, by setting an example of all morality, piety, and Christian temper.

Servants, whether domestic or manufacturing, may admonish their fellow-servants, and labor in the way of counsel, persuasion, and admonition, to reclaim them from the ways of sin, to impress them with a sense of piety, and to save their souls from death.

The Masters and Mistresses of Boarding Schools should be anxious, not only about the mental culture, and general habits, and elegant accomplishments, of their pupils--but also about their personal piety; remembering that the souls of the children are committed to their care, as well as their bodies and their intellectual interests. Piety is too frequently lost sight of in such establishments, and the advancement of the understanding in general knowledge, alone attempted.

A revival in piety is a work which must be aimed at, then, by all. It is a concern of general interest, and must be a matter of general effort. Each one can do something; the poorest, the youngest, the most illiterate member of our churches, has a circle of influence, and must fill it up to the uttermost. From this exertion no one can stand released. All can pray to God, and all should pray to Him, for His grace. All should make it a leading object of their prayers, to obtain the blessing of an extraordinary effusion of his Holy Spirit, upon all classes of men, upon all denominations of Christians, and upon all churches--but especially upon their own.

Permit me then, my dear friends, to call your most anxious attention to this great, comprehensive, and important subject. You have been the witnesses of my solicitude in reference to it. Following many of my brethren, I have called you to special meetings for prayer, to implore a more copious effusion of the Divine Spirit--these meetings are multiplying themselves in all parts of the country--and it is a good sign--but I am afraid that the matter will rest here; I am afraid that many will think their obligations and their efforts at an end, when they leave the prayer-meeting. I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, lest you should satisfy yourselves with these public exertions, instead of impressing each one on his own soul and conscience, the desire and the determination, by God's grace, to seek after personal improvement in piety. If this be the case, we deserve all the ridicule and contempt which the ignorance, profanity, and malignity of many, are ever ready to cast upon the professors of evangelical religion.

Remember, I beseech you, that we are commanded, not only to ask and to knock--but to seek. We must combine means with prayer; efforts with dependence. We must remember that, as rational creatures, we are to use means; as feeble creatures, we are to ask for assistance. We must live, walk, and pray, in the Spirit, as well as for the Spirit; but still we must live, walk, and pray. I am delighted to witness the present attitude of our churches--I hail this excitement about an increase of our piety; but I cannot forget that it is necessary not only to look up to heaven, from whence the blessing is to descend--but into our own hearts, and houses, and churches, where it is to be received.

A revival in piety neither finds nor leaves the subjects of it in a state of indolent expectation. The first sign of its approach is increasing personal activity; the second sign of its approach is still a greater activity--and the nearer it comes, and the more fully it is possessed and enjoyed, the greater and greater is the vigor, and watchfulness, and self-denial, of individual Christians. Each one is seen stirring up himself, and then seeking to stir up his neighbor. Each begins with self-improvement--but no one ends there. There is first an awakening of personal piety, and then a bright emanation of it, in the way of ardent zeal.

I can hold out to you no hope, therefore, my dear friends, of sharing that rich blessing which God is pouring down upon the American churches, and which he is ready to pour down upon us, unless you are prepared to gird up the loins of your mind, and to deny yourselves, and to take up the cross and to follow after Christ. It is not the feeble wish, nor the languid desire; no, nor even the fervent prayer alone, that will bring down the gracious blessing from heaven--but a casting out of those things which are displeasing to God, a making room for it, so to speak, even as the Lord directed the Israelites, when he said, "Bring the full amount of your tithes to the Temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to the test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things." (Malachi 3:10)

I remain,

My much esteemed and beloved Flock,

Your affectionate Friend,

And faithful Pastor,

J. A. James.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-angell-james/the-church-in-earnest/>

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