

An Introduction to William Law

by William Law

William Law's teachings emphasize a deep, heartfelt obedience to God and have significantly influenced Christian spirituality and the Evangelical movement.

Scripture: Romans 12:1, Galatians 5:16

Topics: "Devotion to God", "Dependence on the Holy Spirit"

Description

William Law, a prominent figure in the English mystic tradition, emphasized the necessity of a life centered on God and the continuous leading of the Holy Spirit. His works, particularly 'A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,' challenged readers to pursue genuine piety and obedience, asserting that the lack of spiritual fervor stems from a lack of intention. Influential figures like John Wesley and Andrew Murray recognized Law's profound impact on Christian thought, highlighting his ability to ignite a spark of piety in readers. Law's teachings encourage a deep, inward relationship with God, moving beyond mere intellectual understanding to heartfelt devotion. His legacy continues to inspire many in their spiritual journeys.

Transcript

Andrew Murray said of Law's Affectionate Address to the Clergy . . . "I do not know where to find anywhere else the same clear and powerful statement of the truth which the Church needs at the present day. I have tried to read or consult every book I knew of, that treats of the work of the Holy Spirit, and nowhere have I met with anything that brings the truth of our dependence on the continual leading of the Spirit, and the assurance that that leading can be enjoyed without interruption, so home to the heart as this teaching ...which I believe to be entirely scriptural, and to supply what many are looking for . . ."

William Law, born in 1686, became a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1711, but in 1714, at the death of Queen Anne, he became a non-Juror: that is to say, he found himself unable to take the required oath of allegiance to the Hanoverian dynasty (who had replaced the Stuart dynasty) as the lawful rulers of the United Kingdom, and was accordingly ineligible to serve as a university teacher or parish minister. He became for ten years a private tutor in the family of the historian, Edward Gibbon (who, despite his generally cynical attitude toward all things Christian, invariably wrote of Law with respect and admiration), and then retired to his native King's Cliffe. Forbidden the use of the pulpit and the lecture-hall, he preached through his books. These include Christian Perfection, the Grounds and Reasons of Christian

Regeneration, Spirit of Prayer, the Way to Divine Knowledge, Spirit of Love, and, best-known of all, A Serious Call To a Devout and Holy Life, published in 1728.

The thesis of this last book is that God does not merely forgive our disobedience, he calls us to obedience, and to a life completely centered in Him. He says: "If you will here stop and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but because you never thoroughly intended it." The immediate influence of the book was considerable. William Law died in 1761 just a few days after his last book, An Affectionate Address to the Clergy, went to the printers.

Dr. Samuel Johnson said: "I became a sort of lax talker against religion, for I did not think much against it; and this lasted until I went to Oxford, where it would not be suffered. When at Oxford, I took up Law's Serious Call, expecting to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion after I became capable of rational inquiry."

Gibbon (as mentioned above) said: "If Mr. Law finds a spark of piety in a reader's mind, he will soon kindle it into a flame."

John Wesley calls it one of three books which accounted for his first "explicit resolve to be all devoted to God." Later, when denying, in response to a question, that Methodism was founded on Law's writings, he added that "Methodists carefully read these books and were greatly profitted by them." In 1744 he published extracts from the Serious Call, thereby introducing it to a wider audience than it already had. About eighteen months before his death, he called it "a treatise which will hardly be excelled, if it be equalled, either for beauty of expression or for depth of thought."

Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Henry Venn, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Scott each described reading the book as a major turning-point in his life. All in all, there were few leaders of the English Evangelical movement on whom it did not have a profound influence.

The above biographical sketch was written by James E. Kiefer.

Sidney Spencer said, "William Law holds an outstanding position among Protestant, and among English, mystics. He was influenced by many other mystics -- He was familiar with the work of most noteworthy Christian mystics from the pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth century to Mme. Guyon in the seventeenth." His encounter with the works of Jacob Boehme opened in him new heights of inspiration. "In his literary career there is a blank of nine years -- between An Appeal to all that Doubt the Truths of the Gospel (1740) and the first part of the Spirit of Prayer (1749). It seems to have been during this period that Law undertook the systematic study of Boehme. Law's mysticism is essentially related to his understanding of religion as an inward principle, grounded in the deeper nature of the soul. The inmost centre of our being is for him the 'spark of the soul' which is divine and which moves us therefore to seek after union with God."

Stephen Hobhouse said of Law: "He strongly disapproved of critics; he wished his books to be read 'more with the heart than with the head' and he warns us again and again against 'that learning, which, robbing us of the true fruits of the Tree of Life, leaves us nothing to feed upon but the the dust of words'." also "We

hear, in England, Holland and Germany during the 17th and 18th centuries, of various associations of pious people styled Behmenists, who might perhaps be classified as "Sects". The most vigorous and interesting of these were the Philadelphians. Their ablest member in England was Francis Lee*, M.D., of Cambridge (1661-1719) known personally to J.B.'s greatest English disciple, William Law, and it may have been partly through Lee that Law became interested in J.B. [Jacob Boehme] "

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