

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## William Law, Controversialist and Mystic.

IN this paper little attempt will be made to give biographical details of Law, as the writer agrees with Miss Hester Gibbon (who surely was qualified to judge) "his life is in his works." Suffice it to say that he was born at Kingscliffe, Northamptonshire, in 1686, and was one of a large family. His father was a grocer, but of good social standing, and William, the fourth son, was sent to Cambridge, where he became a fellow of Emmanuel College.

Our main interest is in his religious development, and we lament the loss sustained by the literature of devotion resulting from his silence respecting the inner story of his own pilgrimage. His journey was from the circumference to the centre, from ordinances to personality, from the Gospel to Christ and his final position is very near the heart of Christianity. The purpose of this paper will be to show the path he traced and the end he reached.

Law began his literary career in 1717 as a controversialist, and he never forsook this rôle. First he wrote on ecclesiastical questions, then on theological. He followed on as a champion of practical religion and as an exponent of mysticism—yet he never forgot either deists or indifferent Christians. In order to understand Law's first literary venture it is necessary to recall a little history. When William III. was recognised as King in 1689, about 300 clergy with a number of laymen refused to take the vow of allegiance. They were given the name "Non Jurors." In 1716 Law himself joined them, having courageously resolved to sacrifice all his prospects. He went, therefore, into private life and gave himself to tutorial appointments and to writing. At one time he was tutor in the Gibbon household, and later its spiritual director. Edw. Gibbon, the historian, though uninfluenced by Law's ideas, put on record the following judgment, "In our family Wm. Law left the reputation of a worthy and pious man, who believed all he professed, and practised all he enjoined." His retirement considerably affected Law's ideas, and always he spoke as one removed from the busy traffic of life. The "Non Jurors" had two important principles. *First*, they refused to acknowledge

William's title to the throne, and *second*, they declined to admit that even a legitimate King had the right to dethrone officers of the Church of England without ecclesiastical sanction. They were called "British Hottentots, as blind and bigoted as their brethren about the Cape, but more savage in their manners." Yet sufficient evidence is forthcoming that on the whole their scholarship was profound, and their temper excellent. When in 1691 the vacant seats were filled, the question of the nature of the church was raised and some "Non Jurors" went so far as to declare the national church to be in schism. Dr. Hickes was a party to Non Juring episcopal succession, and he even denied to the usurping bishops any share in the fruits of the Incarnation. He died in 1715, but a posthumous work was published which contained an attack on all who had taken the oath. This led to Bishop Hoadly's reply, and to the Bangorian Controversy. In his "Preservation," Hoadly proposed sincerity as the only test of truth, and declared the church to be subject to the state. He followed this with a sermon on "The Nature of the Kingdom or Church of Christ." He identified the Kingdom with the Church, and insisted that neither was of this world.

"Jesus," he said, "left behind no visible human authority, no viceregent, no interpreters upon which the subjects were absolutely to depend, no judges of the consciences, or religion of His people." These utterances roused the clerical host, with the result that the Government prorogued the Lower House of Convocation (May 17th, 1717). The controversy, however, went on, and in the ranks of the defenders arose William Law, who addressed three letters to Bishop Hoadly between 1717-19. It is impossible in this paper to speak of their contents at length. They have been called "an abiding treasure of English theology," but their misfortune is to have been produced in pre-critical days. They show great logical ability and powers of reasoning, and are models of clear and precise English, but there is a complete acceptance of views of such matters as apostolic succession which do not issue from thorough historical investigation.

In his first letter Law indignantly denies Hoadly's declaration that "regular uninterrupted successions, and authoritative benedictions, are niceties, trifles, and dreams." He attacks Hoadly's view of authority, and claims that the clergy have authority from Christ, and that a constant visible government in church and state is equally necessary. There are two valuable sections on non-ecclesiastical matters, one in which he makes short work of Hoadly's theory (which the Deists shared) that sincerity is enough, and another in which he rejects Hoadly's declaration that prayer should be a calm and unenthusiastic address to God.

The second letter is longer, and in it our author speaks of Confirmation, Ordination, the consecration of the Lord's Supper, Apostolic Succession, and Absolutions. In each defence he goes back to Scripture quotations either particular or general. For example, he founds his argument regarding Confirmation on Hebrews vi. 1-2. He appeals also to primitive observance and to universal practice. His proofs depend on his view of bishops as the successors of the apostles. For Law the Scriptures are *dictated* by the Holy Ghost, and are regarded as inerrant. But more than this, he never attempts any thorough examination of the New Testament words "apostle," "presbyter," "deacon," "bishop." Hoadly would not appear to hold that the Holy Spirit has guided the Church in its appointments, but Law, while he acknowledges the Holy Spirit as "the author and founder of the Priesthood and the Sacraments," limits His activity to the initial act. The Spirit only began a process which starting with the apostles has continued down the ages. Evidence of a defective view of the Holy Spirit will also appear from later writings. Law says in this second letter that he will refrain from dealing with the relation of Church and State because others have already given a sufficient answer.

We pass then to the third letter after noticing Law's pretty gift of irony when he asks Hoadly what his feelings are when he performs the laying on of hands which he believes to be an empty, useless ceremony, and also what would be his attitude if a layman started ordaining in Bangor. The third letter deals mainly with the nature of the church, which Hoadly has described as a universal *invisible* society. Hoadly's text had been "My Kingdom is not of this world," and every preacher ought to read Law's criticism of his exegesis. "Your Lordship," he says, "must be very excellent at taking a hint, or you could never have found out the Kingdom of God so exactly from so small a circumstance. It seems had this little text been all the scriptures that we had left in this world, your Lordship could have revealed the rest by the help of it." Law also shows the characteristically practical bent of his mind, by asking Hoadly to what ends and purposes such an invisible church could have been established. Like his episcopal opponent, Law identifies the Church and the Kingdom, and while he takes into account some of the relevant passages, it is to be regretted that he makes no thorough investigation of the whole subject of the Kingdom. His subtle intellect and "clearness of eye" would doubtless have laid Christians under considerable obligation by such study.

It would be wrong of course to condemn Law for not anticipating the critical results of later times, but there is here

sufficient reason why these three letters have fallen into oblivion despite their logical skill and enthusiastic temper.

Our next discussion must concern itself with Law as a writer on practical Christianity, and especially with his great work *The Serious Call*, published in 1728. Already in 1726, he had given indication of his deep interest in this subject, by his *Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection*, but it is with his later and more developed work this paper will deal.

*The Serious Call* has won well deserved renown as an example of clear and forcible English, rising at times to eloquence. It may be more a criticism of our own time than of the book itself to say that it gets a little tedious, but the reverend author himself shows signs of tiring towards the end. The book, however, is enlivened with quaint illustrations, e.g., the thirsty man who owned a large pond and yet dared not drink of it lest he should lessen its supply, and whose fate it was finally to be drowned in it. Also there are some thirty character sketches. These are more than stock characters. They are salted with humour. There is Leo, so little concerned with religion as hardly to know the difference between a Jew and a Christian; Flavia, who will read a devotional book—if it is a short one; Succus, who will never contemplate rebellion unless there is an edict against eating pheasant's eggs; Cognatus, the prosperous country clergyman, whose words are always eagerly listened to—if he is discussing the price of corn; Mundanus, an old man, who still repeats unchanged the one little prayer he learned at his mother's knee when six; and Classicus, who would not have the two Testaments in his library if it were not they are written in Greek.

Law's general scheme is to set forth the nature of devotion. This is not exhausted in prayer, but is a matter for the whole life. He first deals with Christianity in action and then with private prayer. After speaking of the nature and extent of Christian devotion our author finds that most Christians fall short through lack of right intention. He is an enthusiast in religion, and he claims that all Christians must live their *whole* life to the glory of God. "Everyone must try for the highest if we may thereby at least attain to mediocrity" (*Christian Perfection*). (Law's answer in 1740 to Dr. Trapps' four sermons on "The Sin, Folly, and Danger of Being *Righteous Overmuch*" can be well imagined.) He also shows at great length that real happiness is impossible apart from devotion. Then in Chapter XIV. coming to the subject of private prayer, he recommends a detailed daily method. He would have men rise early and pray—the subject to be thanksgiving. Very solemnly he argues at length for the singing of Psalms in the privacy of one's own room. He has no patience with those who refuse to sing because they have no

voice. Then at 9 *a.m.* there must be further prayer, with humility as the subject. Then follows prayer at 12 *a.m.*, when the Christian must practise intercession and meditate on universal love. At 3 *p.m.* resignation to the Divine will is to be the theme of prayer, and in these chapters he sets forth his views of general and particular Providence. 6 *p.m.* is the time for evening prayer, and after a short chapter on the need for confession at this hour, he rapidly comes to the *hour of retirement*, when death is the proper meditation. The book then ends with some few pages on "The Excellence and Greatness of a Devout Spirit."

It will be interesting perhaps to ask how far such a book is suitable for Christians to-day, though care must be taken not to blame our author for not being born in a later century. The enquiry will be felt to be worth while when the words of Dr. Johnson are recalled, that the *Serious Call* was the first occasion of his thinking in earnest of religion after he became capable of rational enquiry. In his own day his book, which since has become an English classic, exercised a wonderful religious influence, and John Wesley not only benefited from it himself, but made selections from it for his followers. In the eighteenth century such works were badly needed, for it was a time when, as Law says, "Christians are like Heathens in all the main and chief articles of religion." And again, "Examples of great piety are not now common in the world either among the clergy or laity." But what of its modern value?

The emphasis which Law placed upon religion as a matter for all life, time, occupations, and relationships is needed to-day. He says, "The devout man considers God in everything, sees God in everything, and makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety." To-day, indeed, the gulf between worship and service, prayer and life needs to be bridged, but while Law brings the need for the union clearly before our minds, his treatment has palpable weaknesses from our modern point of view. Throughout he would seem to be thinking only of the individual and not of the individual in wide relations with his fellows. There is no hint of what has come to be called "The Social Gospel." His teaching would not necessarily tend to the abolition of that horrid traffic in negroes which disfigured the eighteenth century, and it would not and did not so quicken the Christian conscience in England that when in 1760 and later the Industrial Revolution came, men, women, and children were spared exploitation. Again no one would gather from his writings that in his lifetime Europe was a battlefield. In other words, Law, along with practically all his contemporaries, did not realise the social, industrial, and international implications of his faith. The farthest he went in this direction was the establishment of

schools at Kingscliffe. He did not seem to realise that the principles of Christ's teaching have to be applied in ever widening circles. In fact, he spoke of Christianity rather than of Christ, of rules and regulations rather than of sweeping principles. Jesus was hidden away behind the Gospel—a characteristic of both Deism and Orthodoxy. It is worth noticing that in almost all his references to the imitation of Christ, he adds the word "apostles." The character of Christ does not shine forth in all its peerless radiance, but is to a great extent equated with the character of His followers.

Such is the Christian ideal of life and character presented here. His ideal is Quietism, Pietism, and "Dietism." He has no thought of a kingdom upon earth. In fact, this life is but a short and fleeting prelude, "a hasty and daily preparation of ourselves for another life." Death looms largely. There are two surprisingly long death-bed speeches, and he suggests that our bed should be regarded as our nightly grave.

He quotes with approval Eusebius' description of the two ways of life, one higher and one lower, and he recommends self-denial, renunciation of the world, virginity, retirement, and voluntary poverty as the easiest way of perfection. (He gives a surprising amount of attention to young ladies, and always recommends virginity.) All this goes to show how limited his appeal must be to-day. But his remoteness is more clearly seen from his elevation of humility as the chief Christian virtue. "It is the life and soul of piety." "The soul and essence of all religious duties." His position surely denies the place given to love by Christ and by the whole New Testament. Love for Law is almost exclusively charity, not in the seventeenth century meaning of the word but in its debased modern significance. Love is not presented as the first-fruit of the Spirit. In fact, the Spirit is given very little place in the creation of Christian character. The phrase "the indwelling of the Spirit" occurs, but more or less only as a quotation.

The virtues are not regarded as flowers springing naturally in the soul of the Christian, through the agency of the Spirit, but as separate elements to be sought for one by one. Here is no real approach to Augustine's "Love God and do what you like." The secret of Christianity is not love, but right intention. This one principle will "infallibly carry Christians to the heights of virtue." Men lack not power, not capacity, but willingness and zeal. His scheme thus dethrones love and substitutes humility, and love becomes simply charity. It is to be remembered that when in 1740 Law settled at Kingscliffe with Mrs. Hutcheson and Miss Gibbon, and the rules of *The Serious Call* were put into operation, the whole neighbourhood was

demoralised by promiscuous charity. Tramps and beggars abounded, and the worthy vicar felt constrained to rebuke Law publicly in a sermon. It was a sorry expression of Law's ideas but such results are inherent in his system. But this section must not be closed without heartfelt admiration for Law's stress upon the events of the inner life. He frequently insists on self-examination, and reveals great depth of psychological insight. His protest against formalism was badly needed in the eighteenth century when men were prepared to say, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade private life." There was therefore in Law a predisposition to heed Boehme's call, "Know thyself," but it was not until he had dug deeply into that author that he really saw that the Kingdom of God is within.

His treatment of prayer also requires consideration. He has little to say about corporate worship, but this may be a result of his Non Juring position, though he at least continued to attend his parish church. But surely one of the helps in the cultivation of Christian character is regular attendance at Divine worship.

Our first thought of his scheme will probably be that it is overdone. It is part of his policy of retirement, and for its practice it demands extended leisure. Yet our own bustling age would surely profit by learning to be quiet and from increased meditation.

Law is anxious that the habit of prayer should be cultivated, and he gives detailed advice. He recognises that the spirit of devotion is the gift of God, and not attainable by any mere power of our own, yet it is mostly given to and never withheld from, those who prepare themselves for the reception of it. He recommends the setting apart of some place as a kind of private chapel and concentration of the mind upon some particular subject at each separate withdrawal. He gives due place to thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession. He values forms of prayer, but seeks to pass from them to petitions based on what is passing in our own hearts.

To gain the spirit of devotion, he suggests the recital of the attributes of God or the rehearsal of events in Christ's life, and that prayer may be enriched, he advises turning into prayer the "excellent words of the Bible and books of piety." He laments that so many Christians are afraid even to be suspected of great devotion, imagining it to be bigotry. He is not afraid of enthusiasm (that bugbear of the eighteenth century) and again and again demands "a lively fervour of the soul," "the language of tears," and "transports of devotions." It is to stimulate the passions that he is so insistent on the singing of the Psalms so

early in the day. "They kindle," he says, "a holy flame and create a sense of delight in God." He sounds a deeper note, however, when he says that the shortest way to happiness and perfection is to make a rule always to thank God for everything. This is an idea which appears again, namely, the effect of prayer in producing piety, and the rooting of morality in religion. Here he reaches a much deeper level than in the first part of his book. He is feeling after the idea that fellowship with God in Christ is the secret of the Christian life and character. Ardent devotion is *the* means to the production of a mighty change both within and without. "Everything good and holy," he says, "grows out of heavenly love, and it becomes the continual source of all holy desires and pious practices."

If, however, he had appreciated this idea in all its bearings, the first part of the book would have been deferred for later consideration, and its treatment would have been very different and more profound.

On the whole, therefore, our conclusion is that the work will make but a limited appeal to our age, though its serious temper, sincere spirit, and forcible style will long preserve it from oblivion. When Froude described it as a very *clever* work, Keble replied, "It is as though you said that the Day of Judgment will be a *pretty* sight."

Here is revealed its modern value. By its appeal to conscience, it will press home the need for moral practice, by its insistent demand for sincerity and zeal, it will produce great searchings of heart, and finally by its call for the cultivation of the life of prayer and its claim of the whole life for Christianity, it will sound notes which our modern world desperately needs to hear.

[*To be concluded.*]