

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

A New Year's address to parents and ministers, by John Angell James, inserted in the Evangelical Magazine for January 1846.

Every year ought to begin with pious resolution, and to close with serious examination; and the retrospect of the past should suggest the purposes for the future. The state of religion in our denomination has been of late the subject of deep solicitude and anxious inquiry. We have admitted that there is need, urgent need for revival. A season of humiliation and prayer has been lately observed in many of our churches. This is so far well; but we must act as well as pray. Where shall we begin? I answer, with our families. What shall we do first? Seek the revival of domestic piety. Let all Christian parents and Christian ministers begin this year with new and more strenuous efforts for the religious education of our young people. The children of the strangers are cared for in our Sunday-schools, while, I am afraid, "the children of the kingdom" are much neglected in our families. Is it not true that our churches are composed more of the former than of the latter? Do not many of our pastors, in looking around upon their flocks, sorrowfully exclaim, "Here are the parents, but where are the children?" while the parents take up the deep lament, and say, "Here we are, but not the children you have given us." Is not this for a wonder, as well as for a lamentation? Is the proverb which says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," a maxim of bygone days, which has ceased to be true in ours? Has religious example lost its power, and education its influence, in the right formation of character? No! No! the cause of a lack of decided, earnest, religion, in so many of our young people, especially in our young men, must be sought, where it may easily be found, in the neglect of this pious training, both by parents and ministers. We are all guilty together. We have none of us done our duty.

The pulpit has been regarded, both by parents and pastors, as almost the sole means of conversion to God. Parents

have virtually handed over their children to ministers, and ministers, instead of concerning themselves right earnestly about the business of catechetical instruction, or other private means of gaining an influence over the minds of the young, have contented themselves with the exercises of the sabbath and the sanctuary. Domestic religious instruction and education, and pastoral care of the children of church members, were scarcely ever at a lower point among all denominations of evangelical professing Christians than in the present day. The young are left to the pulpit and the press, which, it is admitted, are powerful means of instructing and impressing; but the judicious, systematic, persevering, and affectionate labors of the parlor and the vestry are most lamentably neglected, or only perfunctorily carried forward. Parents, you are guilty; ministers, you are guilty.

There is no part of my own pastoral history on which, in the forty-first year of my ministry, I look back with more shame, regret, and penitence, than I do on my neglect of the catechetical instruction of the young. It is true I have had to occupy and fill a large sphere of duty, and have been engrossed by most multifaceted occupations, both at home and abroad; but it now seems to me that this forms no excuse, and nothing can form an excuse, for the neglect of a devoted attention to the young. How can we wonder that they go off to the world if they are not from childhood trained both by their parents and ministers in the principles of evangelical religion? As a parent and a pastor, I now see defects I would give anything to supply, and which, God helping me, I mean to supply, through the few remaining years of my ministry on earth. I cast no reflection upon others which I do not take to myself, but I do say, before God and his churches, that Christian parents and pastors are most censurably lacking in their duties to the youth which Providence has placed under their care. I know what a bustling age it is, both in the church and in the world, how much the time of both Christians and their pastors is demanded for the various institutions of the day; but no missionary operations, whether home or foreign, no public spirit, no religious benevolence, ought to be allowed to interfere with the right religious training of our children and youth.

Ought we not to expect that, if proper means were adopted, and a judicious system of education pursued, the children would be like their parents? Are we not warranted to look for this, by the promises of God's word, and the nature of the case? True, we have the corruption of human nature to contend with, a resistance from within to all our efforts to train them up, for God to overcome; but then we have the baptismal seal of the covenant of grace, and the promised aid of the Spirit, to encourage our hopes, and to stimulate our labors. Equally true it is that God is sovereign in the dispensation of his favors; but let not distorted views of this solemn prerogative of Deity be set up against his **commands and promises, and to excuse our neglect and indolence. God's sovereignty, rightly understood, is an encouragement, and not a discouragement, to exertion.** It is not God that stands in the way of the salvation of our children, but we ourselves. God is willing to convert them, waiting to convert them; but then he does so by our instrumentality, and if we use not the means, the result may not be expected ordinarily to follow. It is one of the deep mysteries of the Divine government, that in an affair of such tremendous consequence as the salvation of the soul, one man's eternal happiness or torment should be in any way dependent on the conduct of another. But so it is, and nothing in the universe can be conceived more adapted to awaken our solicitude, and to stimulate our labor for the spiritual welfare of others, than the idea that it depends in some measure upon us, so far as instrumentality is concerned, whether they shall live forever in heaven or in hell. Parents, let the solemn and appalling thought make your blood almost curdle, that you may be the occasion of damnation to your children; while, on the other hand, let the ecstatic idea kindle the fondest hopes, and excite to the most vigorous effort and prayer, that you may be blessed in lifting their souls to glory, immortality, and eternal life.

Look into some families of professors; follow them through the history of only one week; spend but one single Sunday in their houses, and see their worldly mindedness, their gaiety, their frivolity, their unsanctified tempers, their companions, their worldly reading, their amusements, their censoriousness upon all who are holier than themselves;

their homage to talent, their low esteem of holiness, their contempt of faithful ministers, and their adulation of popular ones; their preference of a showy rhetoric to a sound theology; their neglect of family prayer, or their hasty, undevout, and perfunctory manner of performing it; their total neglect of religious instruction of children; their constant absence from all week-day services—and who can wonder that young people, brought up amidst such scenes, do not become pious, but go off to the world or to sin? It is true that from such families we do sometimes receive members; but too generally the children are like their parents, and bring into the church no higher or better kind of religion than they have learned at home; and thus a low tone of piety, a Laodicean spirit, is extended and perpetuated.

In order to a revived state of domestic religious instruction, there must first of all be a revival of piety in the parents. The neglect of which I complain, must be traced up to the low state of religion among those who make a profession of godliness. It is vain to expect that a worldly-minded father, whose spirituality, if he ever had any, has been utterly evaporated by the exclusiveness of solicitude about trade and politics; or a frivolous, pleasure-loving mother, who thinks far more about adorning the bodies, or polishing the manners, of her children, than about saving their souls, should be at all anxious about the religious education of their offspring. Church members must be called back from their wanderings into the world, and made to study afresh their professions, which multitudes either never knew, or have lamentably forgotten. Parental piety only can supply the means or the motives of domestic education.

Fathers and mothers, who are members of our churches, I call upon you, both for your own sakes, as well as for the sakes of your children, to consider your ways, and to seek a higher tone of religion. Remember that the children of inconsistent professors are less likely to be converted to God than the children of those who make no pretensions to religion, inasmuch as to the natural depravity of the heart they superadd that inveterate prejudice and disgust which a perception of hypocrisy never fails to create.

Even the consistent Christian parent never had so many obstacles to contend with, and so many resisting influences to overcome, in the way of the religious education of his children, as he has in the present day. The human mind never had so many objects of engrossing power presented to its contemplation at once as it has now, which not only divert the thoughts of the parent, but attract those of the child—then it is also an age of a progressive refinement in matters of taste, which is running through all the habits of society, and no parent can leave his children destitute of ordinary elegance and polish; and in addition, mental cultivation and the acquisition of knowledge are stimulated to an unprecedented degree, and who can allow, or ought to allow, their children to grow up in ignorance amidst abounding information? Now these things greatly increase the danger of neglecting and the difficulty of maintaining the sacred pursuits and the serious plans of religious education.

There was a time when really there was little, comparatively, for children to learn, except religion and the ordinary branches of a common education; but now, arts, science, literature in its higher branches, with the refinements of modern society, all catch and fix the attention of parents, children, teachers, and even pastors; while religion, amidst this multiplicity of new and attractive objects, is likely to be forgotten, or only perfunctorily attended to. There is nothing in any of these matters which is hostile to piety, nothing but what, with care, may be made auxiliary to it; but then it requires, in such an age, and in such circumstances, additional solicitude, judgment, and earnestness, on the part of parents, teachers, and pastors, to see that the culture of the mind in the knowledge and pursuit of temporal things, does not supersede and cast into neglect the still, yes infinitely, more important culture of the heart in the knowledge and pursuit of things eternal.

This state of things will, perhaps, in some measure, account for a very painful fact, which both parents and ministers attest and lament, that very few of the sons of our more wealthy members become truly pious. Many of the daughters are brought under the influence of true piety, and come into our fellowship, but comparatively few of the sons. I am aware that, as a general fact, far more women are

pious than men; but the disproportion is, I think, still greater in the class to which I now allude than in any other. Many concurring causes will account for this. Young men go out into the world, and are exposed to its temptations, while the daughters remain at home under the sheltering care of their parents. It requires greater moral courage in a young man to profess religion, than in a female. Young men are more swallowed up in business, and have their minds more drawn away from religion, by this means. They are more exposed to the influence of bad companions, and are more in the way of being injured by scepticism and heresy. They are allured to out-of-door recreations and games, which lead them into company. And from the fact of a large proportion of pious people being females, young men are carried away with the shallow and flippant notion that religion is a matter pertaining to the weaker gender, rather than to them. These things will account for the fact to which I now allude, which is indeed a very painful one. Our churches and our institutions need the aid of pious young men of this class. We know the soul of a female is as precious in the sight of God as one of the opposite gender, and we know how valuable are female influence and agency in all religious matters; but women cannot be in such things a substitute for men; and therefore we do lament that so few of our respectable young men become truly pious.

To what use ought this painful fact to be turned, and to what specific efforts should it give rise? First of all it should lead Christian parents to pay a more diligent and anxious attention to the religious education of their sons. Daughters must not be neglected, but sons must have special pains taken with them. As in good agriculture most labor is bestowed on an unproductive soil, to make it yield a crop; so in this religious culture of the heart, the main solicitude should be directed to the boys. Mothers, I beseech you, look to these, and from the very dawn of reason exert your plastic influence over their more sturdy nature. Be anxious for your sons; think of their danger amid their difficulty. Imagine, sometimes, that you see that lovely boy a future prodigal, lost to himself, to his parents, to the church, and to society, and yourself dying under the sorrows of a heart broken by his misconduct. At other times, look upon the enrapturing picture of his rising up to be a minister of

religion, or the deacon of a church, foremost in aiding the religious institutions of the day, and yielding the profits of a successful business to the cause of God in our dark world.

Oh, dedicate that boy to God, with all the fullness of a mother's love, both for him and for his Lord, and pour over him all the influences of a mother's judicious care and culture. Fathers, I say to you also, look well to your sons; be doubly solicitous, and doubly laborious, and doubly prayerful, in reference to them. Be the friend, the companion, the counselor of your sons, as well as their father. Be intensely solicitous to see them not only by your side in the counting-house or the warehouse, but in the church of Christ, and in the transactions of our religious societies.

But this is not enough; ministers must combine their influence with parents, to secure the youth of this gender; and yet is it not an undoubted fact, that both parents and ministers do more for the religious education of girls than for the spiritual good of boys? And why? Because it is, or seems to be, a more easy task to succeed with the former than the latter. "I can do nothing," says the mother, the father, and the minister, "with that lad; I can teach and move his sisters, but his sturdy and unyielding nature resists all my efforts; I must give him up." Thus, requiring more attention, they receive less. True it is, they are removed at an earlier age, and through subsequent life far more from beneath the care of parents and ministers than their sisters; but even with this admission, I still say they are neglected. Ministers, I speak to you and entreat you, as you would have your churches built up with pious and intelligent young men; your Sunday-schools replenished with able and influential teachers; your institutions directed by sagacious and well-educated committees; your denomination strengthened by those who not only understand, but can do much to uphold its principles, and can publicly and influentially advance the world's conversion; look well to the boys that are growing up in the families of your flocks. Wait not until they are young men—they will be gone then from beneath your care, and be caught up perhaps by the Church of England or by the world. Gather them round you in Bible classes, and for catechetical instruction, while they are yet boys, and labor,

by training their minds and hearts to habits of right thinking, reading, and piety, not only to attach them to yourselves, which you easily may do at that age, and by such attention, attach them to true religion.

I do not hesitate to say, that we are all verily guilty touching this matter, and are thus as much lacking in pastoral sagacity as we are in pastoral duty. Be this one of the defects of the past which in the future we will supply; one of the mistakes we will rectify; one of the means of revival we will adopt; one of the plans for increasing our churches we will carry out. Here, in this increased parental and pastoral attention to the religious education of children, especially of the boys, is something definite, tangible, easy of accomplishment, and which, if earnestly, judiciously, prayerfully taken up, will, by God's grace, be followed by a blessed result.

I shall conclude by a few hints both to parents and ministers on the momentous subject of this paper.

To the **parents** I would say—

Cultivate, I repeat, your own personal religion to a higher degree of eminent and consistent piety. Without this you will have neither the disposition nor the power to do much in forming the pious character of your children. Many of you must be sensible that you are in too lukewarm a state, and too inconsistent as professors of godliness, even to make the attempt to bring your children under the influence of true religion, much less to expect success, if you were even to make the attempt—and it is not improbable that some of you are acting upon the conviction that you will do more good by silence and by leaving them altogether to ministerial influence, the power of preaching, and the course of events. Alas! for both you and your children. But shall matters remain thus? Shall this year be added to the number in which you have thus lived? Awake from your slumber, which, if continued, will be the sleep of death, both for you and for them! "You should be an example to the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." 1 Timothy 4: 12

Settle with yourselves the point fully and forever, that whatever advantages of general education you wish and intend to procure for, and bestow upon, your children, their religious character is the first object of your deepest solicitude, and shall be of your practical and persevering effort. Let there be no question, no hesitation, no wavering here. Here fix your center; here direct your aim; here concentrate your efforts, your energies, and your prayers.

Remember, their religious education is your business. Whatever aids you call in from ministers or teachers, you never must, you never can, you never should, delegate this work. God will hold you responsible for the religion of your children—so far as means go.

Begin religious education early. It is in general too long deferred. The natural corruption of the heart is allowed to acquire strength before it is resisted, and Satan is permitted to be beforehand. Begin with calling out the conscience—this may be done as soon as a child can speak. Conscience is the great faculty which in religious education is to be enlightened, invigorated, and made tender. A child can soon be made to know and feel the distinction between right and wrong, and taught to be a law to himself. Inspire a reverence for yourself; be yourself, in a sense, to the child in the place of God as his representative, before he can understand who and what God is. Train even the little child to obedience, to surrender his will to a superior will. What else is practical religion, if we only substitute God for the parent?

Let piety be seen in you, as an ever-present and ever-regulating reality; no mere abstraction, or thing of times and places. Let it be a part of your whole character. Appear before your household as one habitually conscious of the presence of God, and walking with him.

Be exemplary in matters of truth, integrity, generosity. A religion without these will disgust your children. Let there be no little acts of equivocation, injustice, spite, or meanness. Acquire a nobleness of character. A very little child can understand all these matters.

Be good tempered; not passionate, stormy, impatient, severe, denunciatory. A bad-tempered Christian is a contradiction. You may give your children much scriptural knowledge, and load them with warnings and admonitions; but frequent fits of passion and stormy gusts of anger will drive it all out of their heads and hearts.

Avoid all censoriousness upon the failings of professing Christians, and all cynical criticism and cavils upon the sermons of ministers.

Bring round your children the best specimens of religious professors. I do not mean the most fashionable and worldly, for these are often the worst; but those whose piety is consistent and cheerful, whose manners are engaging, and with as much of polish as can be obtained.

Choose their schools with reference to religion as well as education; and if you can, send them where they will have the advantage of a lively, impressive ministry. It is a sad thing for a lively girl, or a sprightly boy, not perhaps ill-disposed towards religion, to find the Sabbath the dullest of all dull days, because they are obliged to hear the dullest of all dull preachers.

Without reducing religion to a matter of mere taste, and imagination, and poetry, combine as much of taste, and imagination, and poetry with it as shall accord with its own spiritual nature, and shall not interfere with the functions of the heart and conscience. I do not mean a mere susceptibility of impression from antiquity, and Gothic architecture, and gorgeous rites, and fine sculpture and painting, and all the other inventions of art for gratifying the senses and putting aside the truth that is to be received in faith; but I mean a perception of the sublime and the beautiful, especially as these are exhibited in Scripture compositions and truths; and an aptitude to see, admire, and relish the skillful, graceful, and elegant forms of nature, as designedly manifesting the glorious ideas of God; a taste for the real beauties of the finest sacred poetry; a conviction that in religion there is nothing low and groveling, intellectually considered—but all that is fair and noble; a

thoughtful, imaginative, and pensive habit of piercing the veil of the material world, and conversing with invisible realities. This appertains, of course, to the elder children, and it is of no small importance to them.

I need scarcely remind Christian parents how much of earnest, believing, persevering prayer for the Holy Spirit is necessary, and how much of familiar, affectionate, judicious instruction, or how much of vigilance, expostulation, tender rebuke, and salutary restraint, must enter into their system of domestic religious education—all this is taken for granted.

Well then, parents, be this your purpose for the year on which you have just entered; your intelligent, solemn, and deliberate purpose. Begin afresh. Set out anew. **Recollect what a solemn thing it is to be a parent, and what a weighty responsibility attaches to those who have the immortal souls of their children committed to their care!**

Ministers, have we not something to repair for the future—in the neglects of the past? Have we been faithful pastors as regards the children of our church members? Have we fed the lambs? Have we, with the mild authority, and, at the same time, with the tenderness of a good shepherd, looked after the younglings of the flock? True, we are not to be the substitutes, but ought we not to be the helpers, of the parents? Has not the catechetical instruction of children fallen into general neglect? Why? Can we assign a solid reason? If we neglect it, are we not the only religious functionaries who do? Do the Roman Catholics neglect it? Do the clergy of the Church of England neglect it? Can we wonder, I again ask, or ought we to complain, while we omit this obvious, this incumbent, this solemn duty—if our young people grow up without any attachment to us, or to true religion? We are the ministers of the whole congregation committed to our care, and the children are a part of it, and therefore a part of the objects of our legitimate attention. The parents will thank us for aiding them in their endeavors to bring up their children for God, and the children will gladly avail themselves of our instructions. What a field do we neglect to cultivate while we leave this virgin soil untilled. Let us then all begin the year with a renewed consecration

of ourselves to the interests of the youth of our flock, and then all future years will yield us abundant evidence that this is one of the most effectual plans for the revival of religion in our churches!

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