Archibald Alexander (1772–1851)
“A Scribe Well-Trained”:
Archibald Alexander and the Life of Piety

Introduced and Edited by
James M. Garretson

Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan
With gratitude to my father,
Marshall S. Garretson
for your example of love
and childlike faith,

and

to my oldest daughter,
Asha Garretson
devoted servant of Christ and
model of Christian piety,

and

the Lord Jesus
without whom none of this
would have been possible

Luke 6:40
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Profiles in Reformed Spirituality

Charles Dickens’s famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”—seems well suited to western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—“back to the sources”—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebears in the faith can
teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: “These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men.”

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: “What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?… They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet…we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.”

Seeking, then, both to honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series

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Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publishers that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke
Michael A. G. Haykin
The selections from Alexander in this volume are taken from the following primary and secondary sources:

**Primary Sources**
Works produced by Archibald Alexander


Secondary Sources


Acknowledgments

Time spent in the company of godly men and women is time well spent. Their companionship enriches and invigorates our personal piety and often enables us to return to our particular places of Christian and ministerial service with renewed strength and commitment.

I, for one, have always been blessed by time reading Archibald Alexander. Of the many people, both living and dead, who have been my spiritual mentors, Alexander holds a special place in my spiritual development. As a young Christian in my late teenage years, I was introduced to the publications of the Banner of Truth Trust and the writings of Archibald Alexander. His book, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, was a door-opener in my understanding of Christian spirituality. As the years passed and my ecclesiology matured, I came to appreciate the role he played in American Presbyterianism and the contributions he made to ministerial instruction at Princeton Theological Seminary. In those intervening years, my appreciation of the importance of spiritual biography for Christian and ministerial development also came into focus, in part, through his writings and biographical treatments of him.
As my understanding of Alexander’s significance grew and my exposure to his vast literary output increased, God has providentially given me opportunity to bring together, in various publications, some of the rich spiritual instruction Alexander has bequeathed to us in his literary remains. Over the course of his lifetime, Alexander wrote extensively on a variety of topics related to Christian faith and practice. Some of his publications were of a very academic and scholarly nature; others were intended to be popular pieces for a wider reading public. Alexander’s published works include books on theology, ethics, church history, missions, biblical studies, biographies, apologetics, religious experience, and a volume of sermons. In addition, he penned numerous journal articles, chapter contributions, forewords, pamphlets, and tracts that were widely disseminated in the nineteenth century.

The selections included in this book represent a cross section of Alexander’s writings and published sermons dealing with the topic of piety. Some of the selections are tracts, reprinted here as they first appeared. A few selections are from forewords or chapter contributions that Alexander authored. The majority of the selections are excerpted from books and articles Alexander published during his lifetime. Where possible, I have sought to retain the headings of the articles and sections as found in their original publications as the chapter titles in this book.

I wish to express my thanks to Reformation Heritage Books for including this volume in their Profiles in Reformed Spirituality series. Particular thanks go to my friends, Dr. Joel R. Beeke, for editing this book.
and for his interest in Alexander’s writings on piety, and Dr. Michael Haykin, for many delightful conversations and encouragement to keep on writing; Mr. Jay Collier is also to be noted for his work in making the final product better.

I wish to express my thanks as well to a number of my former colleagues at Knox Theological Seminary for whom “Old Princeton” and the example of men such as Archibald Alexander remain a standard and model for today’s seminary instruction. In some cases, I learned about “Old Princeton” from you; in all cases, we shared in its heritage: Dr. Robert L. Reymond, Dr. E. Calvin Beisner, Dr. R. Fowler White, and my good friend, Mr. L. Michael Morales. A special word of thanks goes to a Knox Theological Seminary board member, the Rev. Stephan Van Eck, for his enthusiasm in building on the wisdom of Princeton’s past for effective ministerial training in the twenty-first century.

Greg and Susan Beaty, Tom and Mindy Johnston, and Jim and Valerie Evans have also been a source of encouragement and blessing to our family.

As always, my wife, Susan, and children—Asha, Trace, Michaela, Isaiah, and Rebekah—deserve special mention for their interest and support of my writing projects. Their respective examples of living piety both encourage and convict me. Much of what I aspire to become, they already are.

Special mention needs to be made of my dad, Marshall S. Garretson, who passed away at age eighty-nine during the writing of this book. Most of this book was written in his home during the final weeks of his life as he lay dying from congestive
heart failure. My rereading of Alexander’s sections on deathbed conversations and experiences in *Thoughts on Religious Experience* was interspersed with the living experience of those same kinds of moments in the remaining weeks of my father’s life. Our conversations were sweet and remain a precious memory of the way genuine Christian piety enables God’s children to “die well” when their hope and trust are in Christ and His finished work on our behalf. “Be good, follow Jesus, and everything will turn out okay,” was one of the pieces of spiritual direction he gave me in his final days. Alexander would have agreed with his pious counsel.

James M. Garretson
September 28, 2009

*Note of interest:* The image used at the end of most selections is an illustration of Princeton Theological Seminary’s first building. Construction began in 1815, and it was opened for use in 1817. The building was officially named Alexander Hall in 1893.
When we consider how much good has been done by the published works of such men as Baxter, Owen, Doddridge, Alleine, Boston, Edwards, etc., we wonder that men gifted with a talent for writing attractively and powerfully, do not devote more of their time to the preparation of good books. But although, in theory, we acknowledge the all-pervading power of the press, yet the importance of the subject is not practically felt in all its momentous consequences. The man who is enabled to write a truly evangelical and useful book, or even a single tract of first-rate excellence, may convey the saving truth of the gospel to a thousand times more persons than the living preacher can ever instruct by his voice. And hundreds of years after the death of the writer, the production of his pen may be but just commencing its career of usefulness, only to be terminated with the end of the world. Those men, therefore, who are blessed with the ability of producing one work of evangelical excellence, may be considered among the most highly favored of our race, and must enjoy a rich reward hereafter.

The plan of first publishing important views of evangelical truth from the pulpit, and then from the press, with such changes as may serve to render them more popular, is a wise economy of time; and considering the incalculable power of the press, more of our learned and eloquent preachers should avail themselves of this method of benefiting the public, by diffusing abroad the precious truths of the gospel.

—Archibald Alexander
Archibald Alexander
Revered by contemporaries and remembered by generations afterward, Archibald Alexander was one of the great spiritual leaders in nineteenth century American Presbyterianism. His breadth of learning, pastoral background, and deep-rooted experience of the Holy Spirit’s work in cultivation of Christian piety found few equals among the Christians of his generation. Alexander’s public labors as pastor, preacher, and professor remain of benefit to successive generations of Christians through the rich literary legacy of his published writings and unpublished lecture notes. As a pastor, Alexander’s labors were marked by diligence and tender-hearted devotion to the spiritual needs of the individuals and congregations he shepherded. His preaching was renowned for its strong experimental\(^1\) and applicatory thrust. He excelled in

\(^1\) The term experimental comes from *experimentum*, meaning trial, and is derived from the verb, *experior*, to know by experience, which in turn leads to ‘experiential,’ meaning knowledge gained by experiment. Calvin used experimental and experiential interchangeably, since both words indicate the need for measuring experienced knowledge against the touchstone of Scripture.” See Joel R. Beeke, “William Perkins on Predestination, Preaching, and Conversion,” *The Practical Calvinist*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 207.
“characteristical” preaching enriched with profound biblical insight into the spiritual condition of the human heart. As Princeton Theological Seminary’s first professor, Alexander played a pivotal role in designing a mentoring environment that would seek to balance high standards of academic training with profound personal experience of piety in one’s soul. Princeton’s model of ministerial instruction would prove formative in shaping not only the character of the American Presbyterian church, but of American Christianity itself.

Of the many books, articles, and tracts that Alexander penned, it is his writings on the subject of spiritual experience that remain the most widely read and reprinted. Alexander was initially hesitant to publish on the subject of “experimental religion.” With characteristic modesty, he believed there were other authors better suited to address the topic. A letter dated February 24, 1838, addresses his concerns:

I will take into consideration your suggestions. Certainly, if I could believe that I should be able to produce a volume fit to be added to those which you have in such extensive circulation, I would without delay address myself to the work; but without any affectation of modesty, my common conviction is, that there

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2. In Alexander’s thinking, preaching that is “characteristical” is preaching that helps one’s hearers to determine the true state of their spiritual character: do they belong to Christ as redeemed sinners, or remain in a state of spiritual deadness and rebellion refusing the gospel invitation to repent, believe, and pursue a life of holiness? For further observations by Alexander on this topic see selection 24: “Effective Preaching Is Discriminating and Applicatory.”
are already in print much better books than I could write, and that there are other persons much more competent to supply what is wanted than myself. Almost everything which I have ever published has been drawn from me by some peculiar circumstances; otherwise I never should have appeared before the public as an author. My “Letters,” to which you kindly allude, were commenced at the earnest request of some of my old friends in Virginia, and were not expected by me to circulate farther than they would be conveyed by “The Watchman of the South.” I have now brought them to a close, principally because it is painful to me to be so long before the Christian public. I have therefore no plan for the republication of them in a volume. What Rev. Mr. Plumer may be disposed to do in relation to them I know not. He has earnestly solicited from me a series of letters on experimental religion, but I have not thought that I could execute such a work as it ought to be done. I consider it one of the most delicate, as well as difficult of all subjects to treat.\(^3\)

Although Plumer’s request remained unfulfilled, beginning in the 1840s Alexander would publish a number of important studies on the subject of experimental religion.

**Background and Early Influences**

In order to grasp Alexander’s instruction in biblical “piety,” some awareness of his family background and early spiritual struggles is necessary. As is

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frequently the case, family influences and early religious impressions often prove determinative in shaping spiritual character development.

Descended from a long line of Scots-Irish Presbyterians, Archibald Alexander had the inestimable privilege of growing up in a Christian home near Lexington, Virginia. Alexander’s grandfather, for whom he was named, was known for his eminent piety. Archibald’s grandfather immigrated to the American colonies in 1736. With him came a strong attachment and commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as theological and instructional standards to be passed along to each successive generation of Alexander’s in the new country. The influence of his grandfather would in turn shape the convictions of Archibald’s father, William, who also held office as a ruling elder in his local congregation.

The family’s commitment to a Reformed confessional orthodoxy introduced an early spiritual influence in the young boy’s life: having completed the reading of the New Testament at age five, Archibald had memorized the Shorter Catechism by the time he was seven. The theology of the Westminster Standards would ultimately prove determinative in providing the theological framework for Alexander’s analysis of religious experience for which he became so well known. Tethered to a theological orthodoxy that saw the unity of biblical truth in relation to Christ as its Christological center, Alexander’s instruction on the Christian life would maintain a proper balance between the objective work of Christ on the believer’s behalf and the subjective work of
the Spirit of God in the believer’s growth in grace. However, as might be expected at such a young age, Alexander’s “knowledge” was more dutiful memorization than intelligent understanding of the spiritual realities of which the Catechism spoke.

With the passing of the years, the security of his youthful interests gave way to the struggles of teenage doubt and indifference. Happily, grace was operative in his soul and these years were also marked by growing religious sensitivity. Several factors contributed to his changing religious convictions: (1) the witness and example of mature Christians whom God used to open Alexander’s eyes to the reality of genuine saving faith, and (2) experience of the outpouring of the Spirit of God bringing revival in and around the communities in which he lived.

William Alexander’s decision to send Archibald to study under the Rev. William Graham at Liberty Hall Academy changed his son for the rest of his life; it also powerfully impacted, through Archibald’s later ministry, the entire course of Presbyterianism

4. As an old man, Alexander would pay tribute to his former teacher in a major address delivered in the early 1840s. In addition to his instruction in mental philosophy and theology, Graham’s instruction in rhetoric, along with Alexander’s reading of the standard text in the field recently published by the Rev. Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, would eventually shape the instruction in homiletics that Alexander would provide to generations of Princeton Seminary students. For more on the relationship between piety, instruction in the principles of rhetoric, and the development of homiletic instruction under Alexander’s leadership, see Garretson, Princeton and Preaching, 249–253. A facsimile reprint of the 1783 edition of Blair’s influential work was published in 1965. See Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 2 vols., ed. by Harold F. Harding (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965).
William Graham (1745–1799)

Graham was a significant, though now largely forgotten, pastor-educator of America’s colonial period. His small academy was a predecessor of what is now Washington and Lee University. Graham exercised a profound influence on Alexander’s understanding of Christian piety, experimental preaching, and Christian living.
in the United States. Graham’s preparatory academy, modeled along the lines of learning that he had received under John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey, provided the educational and theological backdrop for Alexander’s development as a Christian thinker and theologian. Initial studies under Graham were followed up a few years later with additional instruction in theology and opportunity to accompany Graham on itinerant mission and preaching activities in his native Virginia. Graham’s evangelical piety and preaching helped awaken Alexander to the difference between mere notional orthodoxy and the reality of regeneration as an inward supernatural work of grace that changes both heart and nature.

Two additional individuals would also be greatly used of God to point Alexander in the proper spiritual direction. Following his initial period of study with Graham, Alexander served as a tutor in the home of a General Posey. An aged guest in the home, Mrs. Tyler, would often have Alexander read sermons to her from the works of the Puritan minister John Flavel.\(^5\) God greatly used these readings to bring conviction and repentance in Alexander’s life; the impressions were so strong that on one occasion he had to stop reading to her in order to seek a place to be alone and pray.\(^6\) Flavel’s writings would remain a favorite for the remainder of Alexander’s life. In addition to Mrs. Tyler, an unnamed “pious” millwright’s conversation about the need to be

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“born again” pricked Alexander’s conscience when he was informed that spiritual birth is necessary for conversion to be genuine; it thereby drove the youthful inquirer to seek more conclusive evidence of whether he himself had yet passed from spiritual death to spiritual life.\(^7\)

Besides the influence of these and other individuals in shaping Alexander’s view of genuine piety, his first-hand experience of the outbreak of revival would also introduce him to what a genuine work of the Spirit of God looks like when the Spirit comes on individuals and communities. The effects of what later historians would call “The Second Great Awakening”\(^8\) were beginning to be felt and experienced in places like Virginia at the end of the eighteenth century. Alexander was eyewitness to a number of these outpourings; he saw the visible effects of Spirit-anointed, Christ-centered preaching and the way that people were being changed from the inside out through the new birth.\(^9\) His exposure to these “seasons of refreshing” would be reflected

\(^7\) For fuller treatment of these critical moments in Alexander’s spiritual development see James M. Garretson, *Princeton and Preaching: Archibald Alexander and the Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 6–12. The definitive (and only) biography remains that of his son. See James W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander*, for the complete narrative of Alexander’s early spiritual struggles and eventual conversion.

\(^8\) Sporadic and regional, the “awakening” spanned a forty year period between 1790 and 1830.

in his later theological writings on the subject of religious experience, or piety.

By 1789 Alexander had passed from spiritual death to spiritual life. The intervening months had witnessed great struggle on his part as he sought to understand whether or not he was in possession of genuine saving faith. As he matured in his grasp of biblical truth, he came to recognize the difference between the believer's trust in the finished work of Christ on his behalf as the basis for salvation, and the accompanying evidences, or fruit of salvation, that should flow out of one's new life in Christ.

**Call to the Ministry**

Alexander's public profession of faith in Christ was accompanied by membership in the Presbyterian church; it was soon followed by an internal call to serve in the Christian ministry. As noted, additional studies with a decidedly “ministerial focus” were pursued under the tutelage of Alexander's former instructor, the Rev. William Graham, as Alexander “read theology” and prepared for his licensure exams. Authors of particular importance during this preparatory period included Joseph Alleine, Richard Baxter, William Bates, Thomas Boston, Phillip Doddridge, Jonathan Edwards, the Erskine brothers (Ralph and Ebenezer), Walter Marshall, John Owen, Francis Turretin, and George Whitefield. Bates, Boston, Edwards, and Owen were read, Alexander tells us, “with great care.”

Alexander was brought under care of his presbytery in October 1790; one year later he was licensed
to preach the gospel and began what would become a six decade public ministry in the service of Christ.

The Ministry Years
For the first five years of his public ministry, Alexander engaged in itinerant missionary activity in backwoods and rural settings in the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont area and performed service as pastor of several rural congregations. His growing reputation soon resulted in a call to serve as president of Hampden-Sydney College in 1796. Apart from a year-long break, he continued with the college until 1806, after which he served as pastor of the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for several years prior to his appointment at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he began serving in 1812.

The Philadelphia years provided Alexander with ministerial experience in an inner-city setting with all of its accompanying challenges so very far removed from the rural environment in which he had been raised. Innovative ministry programs were designed and implemented to reach every class and race of people found within reach of his ministry influence. Additional studies were also undertaken that would serve to prepare him for the ministry location in which Providence would direct him and for which he is most remembered.

Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology
In the opening years of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly obvious that the older mentoring models for preparation of ministers could
There are two kinds of religious knowledge which, though intimately connected as cause and effect, may nevertheless be distinguished. These are the knowledge of the truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and the impression which that truth makes on the human mind when rightly apprehended. The first may be compared to the inscription or image on a seal, the other to the impression made by the seal on the wax. When that impression is clearly and distinctly made, we can understand, by contemplating it, the true inscription on the seal more satisfactorily, than by a direct view of the seal itself. Thus it is found that nothing tends more to confirm and elucidate the truths contained in the Word, than an inward experience of their efficacy on the heart. It cannot, therefore, be uninteresting to the Christian to have these effects, as they consist in the various views and affections of the mind, traced out and exhibited in their connection with the truth, and in their relation to each other.

1. Religious Experience, xvii–xix. Alexander’s preface to Thoughts on Religious Experience is reprinted here in its entirety. It is a helpful introduction to his approach to the study of Christian piety and provides the interpretative framework for the selections in this book.
There is, however, one manifest disadvantage under which we must labor in acquiring this kind of knowledge, whether by our own experience or that of others; which is, that we are obliged to follow a fallible guide; and the pathway to this knowledge is very intricate, and the light which shines upon it often obscure. All investigations of the exercises of the human mind are attended with difficulty, and never more so, than when we attempt to ascertain the religious or spiritual state of our hearts. If indeed the impression of the truth were perfect, there would exist little or no difficulty; but when it is a mere outline and the lineaments obscure, it becomes extremely difficult to determine whether it be the genuine impress of the truth: especially as in this case, there will be much darkness and confusion in the mind, and much that is of a nature directly opposite to the effects of the engrafted word. There is, moreover, so great a variety in the constitution of human minds, so much diversity in the strength of the natural passions, so wide a difference in the temperament of Christians, and so many different degrees of piety, that the study of this department of religious truth is exceedingly difficult. In many cases the most experienced and skillful casuist will feel himself at a loss, or may utterly mistake, in regard to the true nature of a case submitted to his consideration. The complete knowledge of the deceitful heart of man is a prerogative of the omniscient God. “I the Lord search the hearts and try the reins of the children of men.” But we are not on this account forbidden to search into this subject. So far is this from being true, that we are repeatedly
exhorted to examine ourselves in relation to this very point, and Paul expresses astonishment that the Corinthian Christians should have made so little progress in self-knowledge. “Examine yourselves,” says he, “whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves—know ye not that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?”

In judging of religious experience it is all-important to keep steadily in view the system of divine truth contained in the Holy Scriptures; otherwise, our experience, as is too often the case, will degenerate into enthusiasm. Many ardent professors seem too readily to take it for granted that all religious feelings must be good. They therefore take no care to discriminate between the genuine and the spurious, the pure gold and the tinsel. Their only concern is about the ardor of their feelings; not considering that if they are spurious, the more intense they are, the further will they lead them astray. In our day there is nothing more necessary than to distinguish carefully between true and false experiences in religion; to “try the spirits whether they are of God.” And in making this discrimination, there is no other test but the infallible Word of God; let every thought, motive, impulse, and emotion be brought to this touchstone. “To the law and the testimony; if they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them.”

If genuine religious experience is nothing but the impression of divine truth on the mind, by the energy of the Holy Spirit, then it is evident that a knowledge of the truth is essential to genuine piety. Error never can under any circumstances produce the effects of
A Scribe Well-Trained

truth. This is now generally acknowledged. But it is
not so clearly understood by all, that any defect in
our knowledge of the truth must, just so far as the
error extends, mar the symmetry of the impression
produced. The error, in this case, is of course not sup-
pposed to relate to fundamental truths, for then there
can be no genuine piety; but where a true impression
is made, it may be rendered very defective, for want
of a complete knowledge of the whole system of
revealed truth; or its beauty marred by the existence
of some errors mingled with the truth, which may be
well illustrated by returning again to the seal. Sup-
pose that some part of the image inscribed on it has
been defaced, or that some of the letters have been
obliterated, it is evident that when the impression
is made on the wax, there will be a corresponding
deficiency or deformity, although in the main the
impress may be correct.

There is reason to believe, therefore, that all
ignorance of revealed truth, or error respecting it,
must be attended with a corresponding defect in the
religious exercises of the person. This consideration
teaches us the importance of truth, and the duty of
increasing daily in the knowledge of our Lord and
Savior Jesus Christ. This is the true and only method
of growing in grace. There may be much correct
theoretical knowledge, I admit, where there is no
impression corresponding with it on the heart; but
still, all good impressions on the heart are from the
truth, and from the truth alone. Hence we find, that
those denominations of Christians which receive
the system of evangelical truth only in part, have a
defective experience; and their Christian character,
as a body, is so far defective; and even where true piety exists, we often find a sad mixture of enthusiasm, self-righteousness, or superstition. And even where the theory of doctrinal truth is complete, yet if there be an error respecting the terms of Christian communion, by narrowing the entrance into Christ’s fold to a degree which His Word does not authorize, this single error, whatever professions may be made to the contrary with the lips, always generates a narrow spirit of bigotry, which greatly obstructs the free exercise of that brotherly love which Christ made the badge of discipleship.

If these things be so, then let all Christians use increasing diligence in acquiring a correct knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus; and let them pray without ceasing for the influence of the Holy Spirit to render the truth effectual in the sanctification of the whole man, soul, body, and spirit. “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth,” was a prayer offered up by Christ in behalf of all whom the Father had given Him.
True Conversion: 
Characteristics and Fruits

Although there is considerable variety in the exercises of sincere converts; yet there are some leading points in which the experience of all true believers agrees. As all are by nature in the same condition of condemnation and depravity; as all are equally helpless; as the same gospel is the object of the faith of all; and as regeneration in all is the work of the same Holy Spirit; there can be no essential difference in the nature of the exercises of genuine converts. All, for example, are convinced of sin, and feel themselves to be in a perishing condition. This conviction may, in some, be attended with a much livelier sense of danger, than in others; but the degree of fear and terror excited, is a mere circumstance which does not determine either the depth or genuineness of the sinner’s convictions; for there may be overwhelming terror where there is but little true conviction, and there may be deep and scriptural conviction where there is little terror, and where the mind remains calm. Indeed, it often happens, that when conviction is deepest, the mind is most calm. Even when it seems to be on the borders of despair, and has almost

relinquished hope, there is often a calm, but sad serenity, which is not easily accounted for.

There is not only a conviction of sin, in all true converts, but a thorough feeling of utter helplessness; not only a conviction of inability to keep the law, but also to repent of sin or receive the gospel. Unbelief is commonly the last sin of which the Spirit convinces the awakened soul—“of sin, because they believe not in me.” But the truly convinced sinner never pleads his inability as his excuse, nor feels less guilty on this account. No, this he is sensible is the very core of his iniquity. Other sins are the branches of the evil tree, but this is the bitter root out of which they grow; and, therefore, every convinced sinner is led clearly to see the justice of God in his condemnation. He may be said to “accept the punishment of his sins”; for he acquiesces in the justice of the sentence which condemns him to eternal misery. He justifies God, and takes all the blame to himself. Indeed, at this point of experience, the goodness, and especially the long-suffering of God toward him, is apt to affect his mind in a very sensible manner; and his feeling is, that if he perish eternally, he never can feel that he has been unjustly treated, but that his gratitude is due to God for His long continued and unmerited kindness.

Views and feelings of the kind mentioned, can only be accounted for, on the supposition that a spiritual change has already passed on the soul; though nothing is further from the belief of the subject of these exercises. The sinner is often renewed before he is aware of it. Spiritual life is breathed into the soul, before it is filled with the joy and peace which arises from receiving Christ by faith. There are evident
pulsations of life, and vital breathings after God, the effect of renewing grace, before the eyes are opened to behold the reconciled face of God in Christ. One of the earliest sensible feelings of the regenerated soul is a sense of ingratitude, which breaks the heart, hitherto hard, into a melting frame of godly sorrow. Tears flow apace. This sorrow is sweet in the experience, because it is always mingled with a sense of the mercy and goodness of God; and yet there may be no thought of being in a safe state.

But, usually, such exercises are soon succeeded by views of Christ as an able and a willing Savior. These first views of a Savior are sometimes sudden and overwhelming. The soul feels itself transported, as it were, into a new world. Gross darkness is exchanged for “marvelous light.” The “joy is unspeakable and full of glory.” The soul exults and glories in the cross of Christ; and all doubt and fear are expelled, and the heart is at once filled with contrition, love, and peace. These first views of a Savior are often more remarkable, and more sensible in the flow of affection which accompanies them, than any afterwards experienced. The blessed vision of divine truth thus enjoyed, may be repeated twice or thrice, and then the soul is left to what may be called the common encouragements and hopes which the gospel inspires. But it would be unjust and injurious to many sincere Christians, to lay down the preceding, as the uniform experience of all the children of God. So far from it, that I am persuaded, that a large majority of those converted in our day, are led in a different way. Their first views are very obscure, and they can point to no particular time, when all darkness and doubt were banished
from their minds. The light, with them, has been like the dawn of day, at first an obscure twilight, but gradually increasing to the clear light of day. They are very sensible of a great change in their views and feelings, from what they once were, but how it came about, they cannot tell. All they can say is, “whereas I was once blind, now I see.”
Another remark suggested by the history of Nathanael is that our Lord is the witness of every action of our lives, and especially, of every exercise of devotion. He sees us when we are concealed from the view of all mortals. He hears the prayer which is offered up in the recesses of the forest or grove. Nathanael, under the fig-tree, felt himself to be retired from all the world, but there the eye of Christ was upon him. Hannah, when she wrestled with God for her Samuel and was heard, uttered no sound, but only moved her lips. No person present knew what was passing in her mind. Eli, the priest, who observed that she was much agitated by some internal cause, uncharitably attributed it to strong drink; but God, who searches the heart, knew the fervent desires of her inmost soul, and immediately returned an answer, in mercy bestowing the very gift for which she so earnestly prayed.

The softest whisper of prayer, when prompted by sincere faith, enters into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. It is not necessary to the efficacy of prayer that it should be expressed even in a whisper, for our

Lord would have all the churches to know that it is He who “searcheth the reins and hearts.” Therefore, the sincere desire which is not expressed by any external sign, is known to Him, and is as acceptable as if uttered in a loud voice. We do indeed, read much in the Psalms of crying aloud unto God; and it is very natural for strong desires to seek for expression by the voice. It is often profitable to employ our voice even in secret prayer, because the sound of our own voice has a tendency to confine the thoughts from wandering, and also to stir up some lively emotion within us. An experienced writer recommends the chanting of the Psalms, in the tone which nature prompts, as serviceable to excite the sluggish feelings. But still, the secret breathing of the heart is real prayer, and is often heard and answered. Through unbelief, we are prone to think of God as removed to a great distance from us, whereas we ought to have the impressive conviction, that we are in His immediate presence, and that He is the witness of all the desires and emotions of our hearts. In nothing is there a greater difference between our theoretical and practical belief, than in regard to the omnipresence and omniscience of God. No Christian ever hesitates about ascribing these attributes to Jehovah. But alas! How faint is the impression of these truths on our minds, even when professedly engaged in His solemn worship.