

*A Practical View
of
Christian Education
in its
Early Stages*

by Thomas Babington, Esq.



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A PRACTICAL VIEW
OF
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

IN ITS
EARLY STAGES:

TO WHICH IS ADDED,
A LETTER TO A SON SOON AFTER THE CLOSE OF HIS
EDUCATION, ON THE SUBJECT OF NOT
CONFORMING TO THE WORLD.

BY THOMAS BABINGTON, ESQ.

SEVENTH EDITION.

LONDON:
JOHN HATCHARD AND SON, 187, PICCADILLY.
1826.

Babington
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PRACTICAL VIEW,

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CHAP. I.

Inadequate Attention to Religion in Education.
—*Some of its Causes.*

MOST persons have occasionally met with a new mansion, showy in its appearance, and commanding a fine prospect, but destitute of that first of all requisites—good water. Captivated by the beauties of a favourite spot, and anticipating a long and happy residence in the midst of attractive domains, the gentlemen who build houses sometimes forget that there are certain necessaries of life, for the want of which none of its embellishments or honours can compensate. A similar disappointment, but of a more affecting nature, very frequently awaits the builders of that figurative house—a family

of children. Their parents have taken the greatest pains to enable them to make a figure in the world ; but they have neglected to use the proper means for furnishing their minds with certain items in the catalogue of qualifications for a useful, respectable, and happy life—namely, religious principles and habits. The house is erected ; but, alas, there is no water ! —That those who despise religion should not wish the minds of their children to be imbued with it, is natural and to be expected ; and that those who, while they ostensibly acknowledge the value of religion, yet hold that the heart of man is naturally good—and that the evils which abound in the world may be ascribed to the prejudice of nurses, the reveries of enthusiasts, the craft of priests, and the tyranny of rulers—should deem religious education almost superfluous, is by no means surprising. However, such characters would slight all my admonitions, and therefore it is in vain to address them. Those whose attention I would solicit are decent and respectable parents, who wish to entertain those views of human nature, and of the duties of man, which the holy Scriptures exhibit. That such persons should ven-

ture to hope that their children will perform, in subsequent life, the duties they owe to God and their fellow-creatures, when little care has been taken to prepare them for this great work, is perfectly astonishing. Do we form such absurd expectations in other things? Does any man suppose that his son will be fit for any profession, or business, without substantial and persevering instruction? Does he venture to send him out into the world as a lawyer, a surgeon, or a tradesman, without a long preparation, expressly calculated to qualify him for the line of life to which he is destined? And yet how many fathers expect their children to maintain the character of Christians, with very little appropriate education to lead them to conquer, through Divine grace, their natural alienation from God, and to become new creatures under Christ their Saviour! God does not treat man in this manner, but furnishes him, in the Scriptures, with the most august and persuasive teachers, and the greatest variety of instruction and exhortation, calculated to turn him from darkness to light, and to induce him to crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts. But man, deaf to the Divine voice, which says, "Go and

do thou likewise," and deaf also to the call even of parental affection, not seldom suffers the early years of his offspring to pass without any systematic and adequate plan of instruction and discipline expressly calculated for the attainment of those great ends.

But let us view this subject a little more narrowly. Is a son intended for a learned profession? He is sent to school. The father is earnest that the master should ground him well in grammar, give him a taste for classical literature, and call forth his powers in composition. Afterwards, when the youth is removed to the university, a college and tutor are selected with anxious care to promote his intellectual improvement. An earnest solicitude is felt that he should become a sound and elegant scholar; and inquiring friends are told what progress he makes in his literary pursuits.—Again: suppose that a more humble walk in life is chosen by the parent, and that his boy is to be a tradesman: with what care does he select a master who perfectly understands his business, and will be likely to make the boy thoroughly acquainted with it? And as the years of apprenticeship draw towards their close, he is solicitous that

his son should be instructed in all the higher parts of the trade, that he may be in no respect deficient, when he becomes his own master, and is to establish himself in life. Let any one who allows these to be just pictures of parental care in providing for the worldly interests of children, say how seldom their spiritual interests are the object of equal solicitude. Are masters chosen with the same care for the promotion of *these* interests? In fixing on schools and colleges for boys destined to the higher professions, and on masters and counting-houses for those who are to move in a more humble line, it is a matter of *prime* consideration to select those which are known to be favourable to true religion? During education, is the progress of the boy in religion watched with unremitting solicitude, and promoted by all those measures which solicitude suggests? Are pains anxiously taken to remove all the obstacles in the way? And finally, is the boy himself removed (when that is possible) to a more favourable situation, if those obstacles are such as essentially to counteract his advancement in religious attainments? In most cases, I fear, even where better things might be hoped, these

questions must be answered in the negative. The efforts made in favour of the religious improvement of youth are partial and unsystematic, and generally cold and languid. But, even when accompanied by a considerable degree of earnestness, they very seldom evince a care and thought at all proportioned to the greatness of the object. An attention to the externals of religion is enforced, and glaring sins are forbidden and punished; and perhaps also the leading principles of the Gospel are occasionally inculcated;—but are the temper, the taste, and the habits narrowly watched? Is evil counteracted, not only in its commencement, but even before it appears, by guarding against dispositions and practices which, though not wrong in themselves, are dangerous from their natural alliance with those which are so? Are the dawns of good early descried and carefully cherished? And above all, is the youthful mind continually taught to raise itself to the only source of safety and strength; to be diligent in self-examination, penitence, prayer, and praise? I fear it can seldom be said that a plan of this kind is followed earnestly, assiduously, and, with due allowance for casual interruptions,

daily from youth to manhood. And yet earnestly, assiduously, and daily is the child taught his reading and spelling; the school-boy his grammar and classics; the academician his Euclid, Locke, and Newton; and the clerk or apprentice his master's business. Can we consult our experience on these points without exclaiming; What prudent care in human things! What negligence in divine! The result of such negligence may easily be anticipated, and is lamentably apparent in the character and habits of our young men.

Is this negligence to be accounted for from any peculiar facility with which Christian truths are imbibed, and Christian habits formed? Is the path of true religion so easily discovered, and so inviting, that the young scarcely want a monitor to point it out and recommend it to their choice; while that of human science is thorny, and arduous, and disgusting, and never willingly chosen? Let the word of God and human experience answer. In fact, truth requires that this picture should be almost reversed. Religion is that which is, beyond all things, repulsive to the nature of man; while human science has many charms for him, and

meets with little opposition from his native propensities. In inculcating religion we are rolling a stone up-hill, which must be watched every moment, or it will soon bound down again; nor can we hope to make any progress in our work without continued and painful efforts.

To those who acknowledge the natural propensity of man to evil, and yet take so little pains to correct it in his education, I cannot refrain from addressing a few expostulations. Do you act in a similar manner with respect to any corporeal deformity to which your children may be subject? Do you not take the best medical advice, and persevere, perhaps for many years, and at a great expense, and with very serious inconveniences both to yourselves and your child, in the use of such means as may be recommended to you for his recovery? And yet the evil you labour to correct probably affects only one part of his frame; or the efforts of unassisted nature may remove it; and even if he should carry it with him to his grave, it may not be fatal to his present welfare, much less to his future happiness. But the disease to which his soul is subject is universal, pervading all its faculties and dispositions. Nature, instead

of affording a remedy, is its source, and, if not counteracted, will infallibly render it more and more desperate; and the evils it threatens are of infinite magnitude, and of eternal duration. What, then, can you think of your negligence? Are you not most cruelly deficient in your care of your offspring? And how will you render an account to that Being who has given you a sacred charge to act as his vicegerents in their education?

The causes of those lamentable and very general defects in religious education which have been noticed are various. At present, I will mention only two or three of them.

When parents, though they may have a great respect for religion, are not truly religious, there is no difficulty in accounting for their lukewarmness in providing for the religious education of their children. If they do not consider Christianity as the pearl of great price; if in practice they make it rather the handmaid of their worldly interest and pleasures, than the unrivalled empress of their hearts, and the sovereign guide of their actions: if this is *practically* the estimation in which they hold it, of course, they will give it but a second, a third, or

a fourth place among the objects on which their view is fixed in the education of their children. If, in their passage through life, they do not *in fact* (whatever they may hold in theory) sacrifice their own profit, or pleasure, or reputation, at the shrine of Religion, when these cannot be secured without some dereliction of duty, it must be expected that, whatever they may profess as to their plans of education, they will *in fact* attend more to the worldly advancement, or pleasure, or reputation of their children, than to their progress in vital Christianity. As such parents, however, frequently lament in themselves defects which they have not a heart to remedy ; let them be asked whether they would willingly see their offspring in the same state of thralldom, pursuing a course which they disapprove, and breathing fruitless wishes after that holiness which they have not the courage to practise. If their minds revolt at this prospect, let them endeavour, in their choice of masters and instructors, to rescue their children at least from the evils which press upon themselves. They may think it impracticable in their own case (though in truth if they undertook the work in a right spirit, they would con-

quer every difficulty by the all-powerful aid of Divine grace) to break through inveterate habits, and to brave, amidst a circle of acquaintance like themselves, the books, the language, the demeanour, to which a prompt and universal obedience to the calls of duty would expose them. But let them have pity on their offspring; and put them in a course which, with God's blessing, may preserve them from the galling fetters which bind their parents.

There are certain classes of upright Christians, (and I solicit their attention with far better hope,) whose efforts in the great work of Christian Education are feeble, from causes of a very different kind. Two of these causes, which arise immediately out of their religious principles, I will now mention.

Some parents, of a truly Christian character, are of opinion, that although the instruction of the head is in a good measure left to man, God vindicates to himself in a peculiar manner the empire of the heart, and carries on his own work of conversion in his own way. They therefore regard human endeavours to lead the hearts of the young to God as (to say the least) of very doubtful efficacy; and perhaps look with some

jealousy on a very sedulous use of means, for the attainment of this object, as indicative of a disposition to *depend* on means, rather than on the power and mercy of God. They hope that if they preserve their children as far as may be, from the contamination of the world, make them well acquainted with the Christian doctrine, and use them to a regular attendance on religious ordinances, He will hear the earnest prayers offered up for them, and in His good time work on their affections and bring them to Himself. These sentiments, in which there is a specious mixture of truth and error, are accompanied by Christian graces and habits which have a powerful tendency to counteract their practical effects. Parents who are wanting in sedulous attention to their children, are often very strict in the examination of themselves, and eminent for tenderness of conscience, for hatred of sin, for love of holiness, and for adorning the Gospel of their Saviour, by presenting in themselves no dubious image of that mind which shone forth in him. By an attentive observer, however, well acquainted with the interior of their families, the operation of the foregoing opinions will not unfrequently

be distinctly traced: and in whatever degree they operate, their tendency must be to weaken, if not to paralyze, parental exertions. The hearts and the habits of the rising generation will not be watched with due solicitude; and evils will not be checked and anticipated, nor promising appearances cherished, with that wakeful and unremitting anxiety which the incalculable importance of education demands. Nature, with its corruptions, will be allowed to gather strength; and grace, if assisted will be feebly assisted, by parental co-operation, (a co-operation which must itself also be altogether the fruit of grace), till the little victims of this false system contract a most pernicious and fatal habit of hearing and repeating religious truths with indifference, and sometimes perhaps are in nearly as bad a state as the offspring of irreligious parents.

How can such a case be contemplated without an unusual share of pity? Of pity for children with bright prospects so blasted; and for parents, whose very piety, under partial and therefore mistaken views of Gospel-truth, prepares disappointment and bitter pangs in future life, if not eternal ruin, for those whom they

have brought into being, and whom, under a better system of education, they might have found their glory, and joy, and crown of rejoicing in the great day of the Lord.

That the parents have adopted partial and erroneous views of religious truth, who can doubt? God is, in the strictest sense, the Giver of all good, both in the natural and in the spiritual world; but in both he employs means to effect his objects; and the well-directed efforts of his creatures form a most important branch of those means. Who expects to reap if he will not sow, or to read if he will not learn his alphabet? Nor is the connexion between the acquisition of spiritual advantages and the use of means less intimate. Thus, though Christ is our salvation, yet the salvation of mankind is spoken of in Scripture as depending on the exertions of the Apostles and their followers. They are called the *light of the world*. When it is declared, that they who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved, immediately afterwards, for the special purpose, as it should seem, of pointing out the absolute necessity of employing means, the Apostle proceeds to ask, "How then shall they call on him in whom they

have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?" (Rom. x. 14, 15.) And in strict conformity with this view of things, he declares himself willing, in his own ministerial labours, *to spend and be spent* for the benefit of others; and charges his spiritual son Timothy, in the episcopal office assigned to him, *to be instant in season* and (by a sort of hyperbole of speech, arising from his deep impression of the unspeakable importance of exertion,) *out of season*. So when indolent or bad teachers are mentioned, the efficacy of means is no less strongly marked. Under the Mosaic dispensation, the sins of the people are continually ascribed to the negligence or the false doctrine of the priests. Our Saviour holds similar language when, speaking of the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees, he says, that "if the blind lead the blind, *both* shall fall into the ditch." And, under the Gospel, the effect of the errors of the well-meaning but mistaken builders of "hay, straw, stubble," on the true foundation, Christ, is pointedly noticed. It is declared, that such teachers shall *suffer loss*; their people not being prepared by them to

abide the fiery ordeal by which every teacher work, that is, the flock converted by him to Christianity—was to be tried. (1 Cor. iii. 11—12) So fatal would be the effect of the wrong measures taken by them in their Christian ministry!—Not to multiply quotations, I will close what I have to advance on this head with pointing out some few parts of Scripture respecting the very case before us; namely, the instruction of children. How earnestly does Moses charge the Israelites *to teach the law to their children, as they rise up and sit down, and come in and go out!* Could he have more strongly characterized instant, constant, unremitting instruction? Solomon is scarcely less pressing in his exhortations *to train up a child in the way in which he should go;* and he is most distinct in his promise of a blessing and success to such instruction. When the Lord appeared as an angel to Abraham, he plainly intimated, that the patriarch's exertions, among his children and the rising generation in his household, would be effectual as means of securing them in the true faith. (Gen. xviii. 19.) And I cannot but think that children were allowed to partake of the initiating rites of circumcision and baptism, at so early an age, on the general presumption that

the appointed means, if duly employed by their parents and sponsors, would secure, under God's blessing, the great object of conversion to God.

If this view of the scriptural doctrine respecting, not the importance only, but the necessity of using means zealously, diligently, unceasingly, for the attainment of spiritual ends, be just; what shall we say of those parents who excuse their want of assiduity and vigour, in taking proper measures to impress the hearts, as well as to inform the understandings, of their children, on the plea that conversion is God's work, and that the times and the seasons for carrying it on are in his hand? I will not argue with them, but leave them to the admonitory voice of their own conscience. When we look forward to the advancement of religion among the rising generation, there are no promoters of that great work on whom we fix our eyes with so much hope as on pious parents. How deeply then must we lament that there should be found among them such principles as I have mentioned; which—operating on parental partiality, or love of ease or other dispositions unfavourable to watchfulness and vigour in conducting education—present us, in a spiritual sense at least,

with "ashes and mourning," in families where we expected "beauty and the oil of gladness!"

But the foregoing error is most to be deplored when joined with another, also arising from a source which challenges our respect and veneration; I mean, the hope entertained by some parents, remiss in the spiritual nurture of their children, that the promised blessing to the offspring of pious ancestors will be realised, sooner or later, in their conversion. On the influence of such a sentiment, when united with that which was last under consideration, I need not dwell. Every one must see that when, on the one hand, a low opinion is entertained by parents of the efficacy of human endeavours, in leading their children to true conversion; and on the other, a hope is indulged that the great Shepherd will, at some time or other, gather them to his fold; the efforts in education will be altogether destitute of watchful and persevering energy, and the worst effects may be expected. Whether, however, this latter sentiment be combined with the former or not, it is of an importance sufficient to claim our serious attention. Let us then examine how far it is warranted by Scripture and experience. Those

who hold it, rely on the numerous passages in the word of God, in which a blessing is promised to the seed of his true servants, and more particularly on the gracious declaration in the Second Commandment. These Divine promises are sources of great comfort to Christian parents, strenuously exerting themselves in bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. What numbers have been supported by them, when toiling, apparently without success, in the discharge of their parental duties! But even those who are so employed may expect more than the promises were intended to convey. And if such persons, the very persons for whose benefit the promises were given, may look forward for the conversion and final salvation of their children with unwarranted confidence; what shall we say of confidence, what shall we say even of hope, in those who are ill performing the duties of parents, and who, though they will scarcely allow it, make the promises themselves the ground of their neglect?

How far a misplaced hope of this kind may have contributed to the lamentable declension, in many instances, of succeeding generations

from the piety of those which preceded them, cannot be determined: but certain it is, that such declensions stain the page of history in almost all times. Look at the successors of Joshua, and of the Elders of his appointment; at the sons of Samuel and of Eli, of Jehoshaphat, and of Josiah; at the descendants from the members of the first Christian Churches, as well as of the Churches reformed from Popery; at the descendants from the pious ministers ejected in this country at the time of the Restoration, and from their hearers: in short, search the annals of the Jewish or Christian church in almost any age, and you will be convinced that the piety of ancestors is very far indeed from being a security to their offspring.

To humble, zealous, well-directed, and persevering efforts, in the work of Christian Education, God gives a signal blessing: but those who will not employ such efforts, have no ground to expect any blessing. They may rather look with awful apprehension to the curses every where denounced in the word of God, against those who have mercies placed within their reach, but will not accept them in the appointed way.