

Foreword

NO HISTORY of devotional literature can be complete without some reference to William Law. This mild and literary Englishman of the eighteenth century wrote about the life of devotion so lucidly and so pointedly that he cannot be rightly neglected even by a generation of men and women who live in a condition that appears to be very different from his own. Because Law stated so honestly the elements of the human situation, and because that situation has not changed, he can speak directly to sincere seekers of the twentieth century. He dealt with matters that are not altered in the least by modes of travel or systems of human government or standards of living.

William Law, as a young man, gave every promise of a successful career in either the university or the church or both. Born in 1686, in the family of a prosperous businessman in King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire, he entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1705 and became fellow of Emmanuel in 1711. His entire life was altered and his career checked when, in 1714, at the age of twenty-eight, he made a decision that seemed to him a matter of honor. When, on the death of Queen Anne, the Hanoverian prince ascended the throne as George I, holders of academic and ecclesiastical offices were required to swear allegiance to the new monarch, but a minority, including

William Law, refused to do so. Because the act that he refused included the abjuration oath, denying the claims of the exiled Stuarts, Law was known henceforth as a nonjuror. In consequence of this act of conscience the young scholar lost his fellowship in Emmanuel College, and also his chance to go forward in the priesthood of the Church of England. He understood the seriousness of his act in apparently ruining his career, but he took the step courageously because he thought the alternative was worse. No defense, he believed, could be given for people "swearing the direct contrary to what they believe." Many who objected equally strongly to the succession decided to conform for the sake of expedience, but Law was made of sterner stuff.

Deprived of his expected career, Law was able to give the greater part of his life to writing and thus made a more permanent contribution than could have been expected without the crisis occasioned by his refusal to swear. After giving up his fellowship at Cambridge his life consisted chiefly of two rather long chapters, during the first of which he was a resident in the Gibbon family, spending some years as tutor of the father of the famous historian.

The other and final chapter was spent with two congenial women companions in the house inherited from his father. Life in this house was devoted to true piety, to charity, and to the education of the young. Once a stranger, without revealing his identity, gave Law an envelope containing one thousand pounds, and Law immediately sent it to his home town to be used in the establishment of a school for fourteen poor children.

Though William Law wrote many books, several of which were highly controversial and of temporary significance, he established the basis of a permanent reputation by the publica-

tion, in 1728, of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. This book has been published many times and is usually included in select lists of the classics of Christian devotion. It may fairly be said to be in a class with Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Dying* and Richard Baxter's *Autobiography*. It stands alone in eighteenth century English devotional literature on a par with the great and numerous classics of the seventeenth century.

The great devotional writer lived and thought in marked contrast to the characteristic men of his age. The religious vigor of the Cromwellian period was so far in the past as to be almost forgotten and the standard reaction to religious commitment was one of tolerance or even amusement. Walpole and Bolingbroke seemed to vie with one another, both in their public profession of Christian orthodoxy and in their private derision of it. Religion was supposed to be good for the masses, but any genuine conviction was beneath the dignity of a cultivated gentleman.

The controlling purpose of the life of William Law was the challenge to his unbelieving age, both in thought and practice. Because his generation was in decay he was not satisfied merely to save his own soul. He believed that a redemptive process could be set in motion by the voluntary establishment of what we today should call committed fellowships and he established such a fellowship which lasted from 1740 until his death in 1761. He encouraged sincere Christians, of both sexes, to unite themselves voluntarily into little disciplined societies, "that some might be relieved by their charities, and all be blessed with their prayers, and benefited by their example." This desire for perfection and the group effort in its direction was, he held, far from superstition and indeed the practicable way of recovery. He knew the defects of his period and he had a plan

for practical change based on the infectious nature of the dedicated group.

By the force of his writing, Law exercised a profound influence on many minds, the most notable being that of Samuel Johnson. Johnson became a very devout man, in spite of his general roughness of character, and left at his death some of the finest prayers in any language, but this development might never have occurred apart from the influence of the humble nonjuror. Johnson, while a student at Oxford, read the *Serious Call* and consequently became convinced that it was possible to be a Christian without any loss of intellectual integrity. "I expected," said Johnson, "to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it, but I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion after I became capable of rational inquiry."

Though there have been many reprints of Law's most famous work, the present volume represents something new. In this we find the work of a group of ordinary Christians of the twentieth century, most of them laymen, who have been so helped by the *Serious Call* that they have undertaken to present the book in condensed but faithful form for the use of their contemporaries. It is hoped that seekers of our age, who are dissatisfied with inadequate answers and with superficial living may find that the enduring work of two centuries ago may speak to their condition now.

I know the men of Fort Wayne, Indiana, who have done this work and I hail their achievement as remarkable. It is one of the most convincing evidences of the renaissance of lay religion in our troubled but promising time.

ELTON TRUEBLOOD.

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Preface

IN THE AUTUMN of 1951 a certain man in our parish walked into my study with an idea that was destined to transform our church. For several months he had been dwelling in the valley of shadows, and during those months he and I had learned to pray together. Our first lessons were learned in the dark and lonely corridor of the polio ward in a local hospital as he kept vigil outside his daughter's room. While iron lungs were filling our ears with the eerie but life-giving sounds of their mechanical breathing, my friend and I were crying importunately into the ear of God with quite another language. God heard our pleading and the prayers of our countless concerned friends. He blessed the skillful efforts of the corps of consecrated doctors and nurses. And at last the day arrived when Kate would return to her home to begin the long years of convalescence.

It was then that my friend began to visit me in my study almost daily, and virtually every visit included a time of prayer. As I recall it, our prayers never were selfish petitions — even in the hospital corridor. But now that we were free of the shadows and sounds of the polio ward we began to discover new dimensions in the world of prayer. There was a reaching-out quality

in our prayers which led us to envelop human concerns as the concentric circles emanating from a pebble dropped into a pool gradually envelop the whole pool. There was a reaching-up quality which led us simply to thank God for God. And there was a reaching-down quality which led us to a new sense of at-one-ness with the eternal as we realized that we live and move and have our being in him.

With this kind of experience in the background, my friend came that day with his idea. "I have become convinced," he said, "that you and I have found something that many men in our parish need and want. Why can't we agree that at a certain time each week any man who so desires may meet with us for prayer and for a discussion of anything pertaining to the Christian life?"

Needless to say, this was precisely the sort of idea for which I, as his pastor, had been praying. Within minutes we had arrived at certain ideas or principles which have since become a kind of unwritten charter: We would meet during a lunch hour, which meant that most men could come if they truly wanted to; we would give absolute priority to our prayer time, which meant that no other meeting or project would take precedence over this one; we would make no attempt to attract large numbers of men, which meant that we would heartily welcome anyone who chose to attend out of a felt need; we would appoint no leaders or officers, which meant that we would proceed as the Holy Spirit guided us; and we would select a devotional classic to serve as a basis for our discussion, which meant that we would be lifted above our own limited experiences.

The following Wednesday noon five of us met around a table in the church kitchen. After several devotional classics

had been reviewed we agreed to use William Law's *A SERIOUS CALL TO A DEVOUT AND HOLY LIFE* as the basis for our thinking and praying. We selected this book for the not too admirable reason that none of us had previously read it! Each of us purchased a copy of *A SERIOUS CALL* and read in it at his leisure. When we came together as a group, one man would read aloud until someone interrupted him with a comment. Some days we read an entire chapter without interruption and other days we read only a sentence or two.

Our first responses to *A SERIOUS CALL* were not too friendly — certainly not enthusiastic. We felt that Law used too many words to say the obvious. Sometimes he seemed to speak from another world and beside the point of our interests. Sometimes his choice of words and almost always his punctuation stood in the way of our understanding.

But whenever someone suggested that we lay aside *A SERIOUS CALL* and select another book, there was someone else who offered good reason why we should see this book through to the end. As the weeks passed into months and as our group grew larger, we came to feel that William Law was one of our number. He seemed to speak directly to *us*! For anyone to suggest now that we change books would be tantamount to betraying a faithful friend.

Then one day we reached Chapter 18, in which we read of Paternus and his instruction to his son. Surely here were paragraphs that not only applied to each one of us but that every man in our parish would appreciate reading. At that point, one of the men around the table suggested that we lift out the words spoken by Paternus to his son, mimeograph them, and distribute them among our fellow parishioners. We all thought that a good idea, but someone then remembered other para-

graphs that he was certain would be generally appreciated. We soon discovered that each man recalled particular sections as being especially worth-while. And before that session had closed we had decided to abridge the entire book!

We developed this procedure: (1) Each chapter was abridged by one man working independently; (2) the entire group reviewed and amended each abridgment; (3) I then took the results of this group effort and co-ordinated them into the unit as it now stands. In abridging the original work, we eliminated large sections of the text, of course; and we greatly reduced William Law's punctuation, especially commas. For the most part we retained his choice of words. However, we have in a few instances substituted synonyms where the meaning attached to the original has become antiquated.

As I have already indicated, when we began our project we entertained no thought of publishing the abridgment. We thought the effort would be good spiritual discipline for ourselves and we intended only to circulate the product of our labor among our friends and fellow parishioners. It happens, however, that D. Elton Trueblood, the eminent Quaker, is intimately acquainted with our church. Many of our laymen have responded to his vigorous leadership of the Yoke Movement. When he heard of our project and saw some of the chapters we had prepared, he urged us to publish the abridgment. It was his feeling that this shorter and fresher form would bring *A SERIOUS CALL* to the attention of many persons who would otherwise pass it by. He also felt that the abridgment would be used as text or resource material in many college classrooms. We desire to thank Dr. Trueblood for the inspiration that he gave us and for his willingness to write a Foreword interpreting William Law.

At the outset of this preface I mentioned that the idea that ultimately gave rise to this book has also transformed our church. The prayer cell that has produced this abridgment has included wholesale grocers, factory workers, physicians, lawyers, and salesmen. Whenever a group such as this meets weekly for silence, prayer, and serious discussion of the Scriptures or some other devotional classic, a new and transforming power begins to flow into the life of the local church. One of the first evidences of this new power appeared when other people formed themselves into similar cells. We have since enjoyed groups of mothers, of business and professional women, of unmarried adults, of recently married couples, and of choir members.

As the outline of our procedure implies, I must bear the responsibility for any errors of judgment and for any other shortcomings in the abridgment as it now appears. This responsibility I happily bear. On the other hand, any virtues and any unusual wisdom of selectivity that may grace our abridgment are rightly credited to the men who prepared the first draft of each chapter and to the group which rigorously criticized and drastically amended those first drafts.

The men in our prayer cell have asked to remain anonymous, pleading that they are neither professional writers nor authorities in the devotional life. Precisely because they genuinely rate themselves in this humble way, I feel compelled to deny their wish and to introduce them to our readers.

The man who came with the transforming idea is Mr. William T. McKay, a businessman and an elder in our church. The men who prepared the working drafts of the chapters are: George W. McKay, H. Vaughn Scott, M.D., Rev. F. Philip Rice, Earl W. Johns, and Clifford Backstrom. The men who

regularly shared the life of our prayer cell during the period of this project, and who contributed much in terms of helpful criticism, are: John E. Culp, M.D., Roy Welty, Rev. Robert Roschy, Howard C. Smith, James Jackson, Robert J. Griffin, and Dale W. McMillen, Jr. All these men save the two ministers are members of our church. Mr. Rice is a colleague on our staff, while Mr. Roschy is a onetime executive secretary of our local council of churches.

We send this book forth in a spirit of humble enthusiasm. We have met a man who has spoken to our condition. We give you what we consider to be the most pertinent of what he has had to say.