

ON THE SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE,
FORM AND POWER
OF GODLINESS,
IN A LETTER TO A FRIEND.

“Having the form of godliness, but denying its power.”
2 Tim. 3:5

ON THE SHADOW, etc. OF GODLINESS.

My dear friend,

If I were to communicate to you my thoughts on the contents of the manuscript, which has been sent me, I should say briefly, that all that which is not internal, and has not God himself in Christ, as its foundation and source, can only be called the mere shadow, and not the substance and essence of godliness. From this general proposition, it is not difficult to deduce all that I have otherwise to say upon the subject.

FIRST. When we conduct or show ourselves before men, in conversation, action, or gesture otherwise than we mean, or different to what we are in reality or wish to be, however secretly or subtly this may take place, we do not walk in simplicity; it is falsehood, and not truth; or at least it is something assumed and dissembled; a shadow and not the substance: an abomination in the sight of God.

It is not only wrong, to show ourselves better than we are, but it is an improper affectation, nay, often a vain desire of being better thought of, when we represent ourselves, whether in words or otherwise, to be poorer, more miserable, and worse than we believe and feel ourselves to be.

I have purposely employed above, the expression, “are or wish to be”, for a person that is evil, proud, irritable, etc., but still sincerely wishes to possess the opposite virtues, ought according to the divine law, and his own conscience, to resist the evil and suppress it, that it may not break forth: and in doing this, he neither dissembles nor acts the hypocrite; on the contrary, he would be guilty of dissimulation, if he suffered it to break forth; since he purposes and wishes in his heart what is good, and not what is evil. But if such a one, who suppresses the evil that is within him, for instance, anger, and behaves himself meekly, were to imagine on this account, that he already essentially possessed the virtue of meekness, or should seek to be esteemed by others, as a meek character, he would be deceiving himself. He has the appearance, but does not yet possess the substance of this virtue.

“Oh my God, how much does hypocrisy, formality, and dissimulation pervade fallen and perverted man! And how little are we aware of this abomination in ourselves, since by reason

of the thick darkness and confusion which fills our minds, we do not perceive what is in them, because we remain so little with ourselves, and abide still less with thee! Teach me, God, who art so inexpressibly near me, both outwardly and inwardly, teach me to walk under the observation of thine eye, in the pure light of thy truth, that I may practice simplicity in all my actions and deportment.”

SECONDLY. It follows from the above general proposition, that all the duties which are included in serving God, and which have not real devotion of heart and the worshipping of God in spirit and in truth for their basis and origin, are nothing more than a shadow, an outward semblance, a form of godliness, but not the substance.

Hence I remark, that it is not good for a devout person, who walks in the spirit, to engage in too many religious exercises, because by this means, the inward power and devotional feeling is easily weakened and wearied; but he must attend and apply himself with so much the more circumspection and heartfelt devotion to the fewer and more moderate exercises, which he retains.

However, if there be but sincere devotion of the heart in all our external religious duties: our works are then no mere and vain shadow, but acceptable to God in their degree; even supposing that we have not yet attained to the worshipping of God in spirit and truth, (taken in its fullest sense,) and at which we cannot arrive by our own efforts.

THIRDLY. We may infer from hence, that all light or knowledge of God and divine truth, which is communicated to us, either immediately, from without, or which we attain by the efforts of our own reason, or if, after receiving some substantial light of truth from God in our center or understanding, we transfer it into our imagination and reason, and form to ourselves ideas of it, draw consequences or inferences from it, and obtain some measure of light or knowledge by our own efforts: yet though it were even concerning the most spiritual and inward ways of Christianity, all this light and knowledge, however profound, beautiful, pleasant, and inward it might appear to us to be, in so far as it is only a form and not the substance of the truth, is a counterfeit and imitation, a portraiture, the work of our own hands, in which self-love often takes more delight than in the original, or which, taken in its best sense, is only a speculative truth; that is, when the substantially acquired knowledge of the truth within, reflects itself, and represents itself in the mirror of the imagination, and thus the individual contemplates a beauteous object in this mirror, but not the object itself.

By this, I by no means intend to reject any good external means whatever, or any attained knowledge in its right use and due season; for this would be going too far; I only wish to show that there is a difference between the means and the end, the form and image, and the substance. The form can represent to us the substance or original, and incite us to love it; the means may lead us to the end proposed, without which we perhaps never should arrive at it; the making use of them in proper order and degree, is very useful and laudable, but it is Imprudent and dangerous to stop there, as if it was the end, and the substance of the thing itself.

Speculative or reflective knowledge is the production of our reason, (or operative understanding,) and there are various kinds of such knowledge, according to the individual's state; but substantial and contemplative knowledge is the effect of the pure or passive understanding. Reflective knowledge of the truth, is a more or less laborious, speculative cogitation, effort, and operation of our understanding or reason, and has never the essential truth before its eyes, but merely an image of the truth, as in a mirror; but contemplative knowledge of the truth, is a very easy, direct vision, and extremely simple act of our understanding, if that can be called an act, when our eye sees and enjoys the light; and he that possesses this contemplative knowledge, has also the substance of the truth, according to the measure of his grace and illumination.

Notwithstanding all this, let it be well observed, that I by no means reject reflective knowledge entirely, and without distinction; for God has given us a capacity for this purpose, which is our imagination and reason. A soul that seeks God and his truth, may occasionally be much supported and assisted in her course, by means of a good meditation. Nor could enlightened souls ever make known the truth to others, if they did not in some degree make use of their active understanding, and declare the truth in a more or less figurative manner. It is true, that during the states or paths of purifying suffering, all previously acquired reflective knowledge, seems, as it were, to fall away and vanish; for where fruit is to be produced, the blossom must first fall off; if the substance is to enter the heart, and truth present itself there, the image in the mirror must be covered up, that the sight may be turned away from and into it. But even this is frequently restored to us, in the divine good pleasure, and that too, in a manner much more pure, beautiful, and lively; and after we ourselves, and the powers of our souls with their operation, have been purified. God grants us occasionally a holy diversion and excursion of this kind; yea, he sometimes leads us out to look at his paintings and delineations, and then again inwards to contemplate the original and substance of truth; and thus going in and out with our Shepherd, we everywhere find food and pasture. But letting seven years too soon? (Gen. 29:25-27) That which is sensible, has certainly some resemblance to that which is really spiritual; but they are not therefore one and the same thing.

FINALLY. We may also observe on this subject, that all our inward acts of prayer and devotion, of collectedness, humiliation, resignation, adoration, love, etc., in so far as they proceed solely from ourselves: in short, all that is not God nor God's work in us, when viewed in its proper light, is something self-made, and only a form, but not the substance of godliness.

When a soul, by passing through many trials and paths of humiliation, is in some measure purified, and hence is permitted to experience in her center, the pure and substantial operation of God: everything that she had previously done or experienced, even her most inward and simple activity in communion with God, (notwithstanding the grace that co-operated with it,) then appears sensual, gross, and imperfect, as something affected and not real, and as something human, mixed, and of no value. Yet that which preceded this state is not to be altogether rejected as evil, or even to be disesteemed; much less ought it to be regarded in this light, with reference to other seeking souls, who perhaps may not have experienced similar

purely divine operations. For the soul that experiences them, regards them not as they are good in their kind and season, but as they are in comparison with the sublimity and purity of the substantial operation of God, which she then experiences, with reference to which, as before said, all appears to her mean and unsubstantial. Such a judgment is good and proper for her, but not always good and useful for others.

It is not to be believed how feeble, worthless, and faulty is all that we do, even that which is most inward and spiritual, in so far as it proceeds from ourselves. It is therefore very advisable for a devout soul, that in her intercourse with God, she gradually learn to cease from her own gross works, to keep a Sabbath to the Lord, and let him work in her by his Spirit; and that when in advancing further in the experience of the pure operation of divine influence, she perceives a secret displeasure and disgust at her own works, and on the contrary a peaceful inclination to inward passiveness, she resign herself, without apprehending any danger, to this guidance of divine Wisdom.

But lest any unmodified person should from hence derive occasion for a state of religious apathy and false vacuity, reference may be made to what has been already said in the preceding pages and the following general rule may also be observed, except in an extraordinary state of suffering: that as soon as God works, we must be passive; and when we are not conscious of his operation, we must wait for it, as before said, in a state of sacred calm and solemnity in his presence. It is, however, not advisable to be altogether quiet at such times, and not do anything. We may, nay we must work at such times, when grace gives us liberty to do so, but as our state may require, altogether simply and fervently, with the heart and affections, meekly and resigned, as in the presence of God, arid ready, at the least hint or consciousness of his operation, to be passive, and make room for him.

“O Lord, thou all sufficient and infinite Being, the supreme Being, the sole Being, yea, more than Being! Thou alone canst say with effect, *I am*; and this ‘I am’ is so unlimited and undoubtedly true, that no oath can be found, which places the truth more beyond all doubt, than when this word proceeds from thy mouth, ‘I am.’ ‘I live.’ ”

“Yea, amen ! *thou art*” My spirit bows before thee, and my inmost soul confesses unto thee, that thou art. How blessed do I esteem myself, that thou art, and that thou canst not cease to be! How blessed am I, that I know that *God is*, and that I can make this confession, that *God is*! Hear it all ye creatures, *God is*! I rejoice O my God, that thou art; it delights me that thou art. What a blessed and happy thing it is that thou art so good, that thou art, and that thou art he, who thou art! I had rather that I were not, and that all things were not, than that thou shouldst not be.”

“Yet what am I, and what are all things? Am I in reality and is all in reality? What is this *I*? What is this all? We are only because thou art, and because thou wilt that we should be; poor diminutive beings, that in comparison with thee, and in the presence of thy Being, are a form and a shadow, and not worthy to be called a being. My being, and that of all things, vanishes, as it were, before thy Being, much sooner, and in a greater degree, than a taper in the full blaze of

the sun, which is not seen, and is so overpowered by the greater light, that it is as though it were not. O that thou wouldst thus overcome and annihilate me, and that the sight of thee might thus supersede, and as it were, extinguish me; thy grandeur, my meanness; thy immense light, my twinkling light, yea, my obscurity; thy most pure operation, my defective working; thy all, my nothing !”

“I am only a form, a wretched shadow, when thou art not in me, and I in thee; when thou art not the basis and the being of my being. All that I know, and all I contemplate, is only a self-created, lifeless nonentity, or at least an uncertain image, an unsatisfying, transient form and shadow, if thou thyself dost not enlighten me, and if thou do not grant me thyself to contemplate. O thou solely substantial truth ! all that I seek, all that I love, all that I possess is only a shadow and semblance, but no reality, if I do not seek thee, and love thee, and possess thee, O thou, who art the solely substantial good, the joy, the delight, and the glory of my soul ! all my works, yea, every motion and effort of my internal and external powers, are shadow and not substance, unless thou thyself art the origin and mover of them, O thou original, solely essential good, and infinitely prolific life!”

“But what do I say? Without thee, I am not only a form and a shadow, but a wretched and horrible monster; and when I work of myself, all my works, however good and holy they may appear, are hateful, nay, even sinful in thy sight; not only because they proceed from me, who am altogether sinful and corrupt; but also because I seek, please, and exalt myself in all things, under the most plausible pretexts and appearances, and ascribe to myself the glory which most justly belongs to thee. O what a dreadful thing is self ! I justly abhor myself, when I behold myself in the immediate presence of thy purity. Self-pervades me; I am utter selfishness; all my outward and inward motions are selfishness; all my virtues, as proceeding from me, are selfish and impure in thy sight.”

“O that I might be no more, nor have any longer in myself, either life, or understanding, or will, or thought, or any other motion; and that thou, my God, my Jesus, might be and work all in me! Let that, O Lord ! which thou thyself dost not speak and work in me, be forever silent, and cease. Condemn and destroy in me, all which thou art not, and which is not thee. Take entire possession of the place which I now occupy, and do in me and through me, what is pleasing in thy sight. Let me exist no more, but thou alone be all in all; and thus do thou lead me entirely out of myself, and of all that belongs to me, into thee, O my God, my origin, and my end ! Then shall I no longer be in a state of nonexistence and appearance, but in reality, and delivered from every evil, to the eternal glory of thy name ! Amen.