

Dr. Archibald Alexander

Dr. Archibald Alexander is one of the most remarkable men found on the pages of the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. This eminent theologian was the founder and first professor of Princeton Theological Seminary (1812). This institution was for more than a century a stronghold for the Reformed faith. When in 1929 the Modernists in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. succeeded in reorganizing Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Machen and others felt compelled out of love for the Reformed faith to establish Westminster Theological Seminary.

In this day of religious declension, there are still a goodly number who have a high regard for the doctrines so ably taught and defended by Dr. Archibald Alexander. There are, however, few who are acquainted and interested in his views on religious experience. And it is particularly in this field that A. A. made such outstanding contributions.

Apart from Jonathan Edwards- the greatest American authority on experimental religion- there have been but few if any, that have had the depth of insight in Christian religious experience of A. A. Therefore we consider it very encouraging that the Banner of Truth Trust Company, London, England- have published anew that unusual book of Alexander dealing with "Thoughts on Religious Experience".

The intensity of his interest in this subject cannot be fully understood apart from a knowledge of his own search for the Truth as it is in Jesus. In his biography- written by his son, Dr. James W. Alexander, who was also a godly and most able preacher- we find how he learned about the necessity of the New Birth and also how by the grace of the Spirit of God he himself by the way of that Birth from above, entered into the kingdom of God. On the basis of the above mentioned biography we will now attempt to give our readers a few glimpses out of the life of this eminent man of God.

1. His Background:

His grandfather, Archibald Alexander emigrated about the year 1736 to America. With his two brothers he had left Ireland. Although the Alexander brothers came from Ireland, they were of the Scottish race. Their father, Thomas Alexander had brought his family from Scotland before settling in the neighbourhood of Londonderry.

The three Alexander brothers then came to America at the time of the Great Awakening. At this time a very widespread and remarkable work of grace was going on throughout the great part of the nation. This movement under the leadership of the most godly and learned Jonathan Edwards was greatly owned by the Lord. Shortly after they left Ireland, Archibald Alexander became a subject of the good work, under the preaching of Mr. Rowland. According to the narrative, few men ever exhibited true godliness to the same

degree as did grandfather Archibald.

Much different is the information we have concerning his son William, the father of Dr. Archibald. Although he was an elder in the Presbyterian church, and was known as one who knew the entire Larger Catechism by heart, with all his outward strictness he did not exhibit in any way the characteristics of true godliness as did his father. His children - among which was young Archibald - were faithfully trained in the Shorter Catechism. This was excellent as far as memorization was concerned, but the great pity was these children were never taught how these great and glorious truths were relevant to their own lives.

2. His Early Youth:

Now we have some very brief information about his grandfather Archibald, and his father William, let us turn to the young Archibald himself. He was born on April 17, 1772. In his early youth there were no indications of his great ability in the field of learning, nor were there any traces of the godliness for which he became so well known in his later life.

Life in America for a young boy was so much different than it is today. In those days of pioneering they became very early acquainted with the hardships of life. Serious responsibilities were theirs when still very young. Just one example, the day he became eleven years old his father gave him a rifle and sent him out for several days in the mountains in search of cattle which were lost.

As a healthy boy, he was an excellent swimmer. And as every other young Virginian at this time, he could handle and ride horses with great ease and charm.

His practical training at home was outstanding in many a way, but it was very difficult at this particular period in Virginia to find good schools where the children could receive a proper education. In later years he made this interesting comment about one of the schools, "The custom was, to read with a loud voice as we could while getting out lessons, as it was called. When within a quarter of a mile of a country school, one might hear like a distant chime the united voices of the scholars. Upon reflection, I cannot think that I derived the smallest benefit from the year or part of a year spent in this school, unless my lungs may have been strengthened by perpetual exercise".

Other instances could be related to show how inadequate the education was in regard to our friend Archibald, and that there were definitely no indications in his attainments at school that would lead one to conclude that his great ability was already evident in his early youth. But for our present purpose, we must leave this aspect of his life to consider his attitude toward religion.

At the early age of seven, Archibald had learned the entire Shorter, and had already begun with the Larger Catechism. This is truly quite an accomplishment for a boy of his age, and

seems to indicate that his father and mother were quite serious and concerned about the religious training of their children. In this regard they may be considered as a good example for the parents of today. For how few parents are making a sincere and consistent attempt to get their children thoroughly acquainted with the indispensable truths of the Scriptures which are so ably and clearly set for in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Many who profess to love the Christ of the Scriptures, make practically slaves of themselves to give their children a superior education and to acquire for them a more than average place in society, while they utterly neglect their children's spiritual welfare. And what excuse can they ever have for this? Alas these precious truths, so regularly taught by parents, and seemingly so well received by their children, left very little of a positive influence on Archibald at this time. He did have a strong liking for religion in general and particularly for that which he had been brought up in but that's how far it went! His views of the Truth were far from being sufficient for eternity.

He had learned the Catechisms, but without reflection. Later in his life looking back at this period of time, his own words are, "My ignorance was profound! My only notion of religion was that it consisted in becoming better". He had an utter aversion to what was spiritual. He used to laugh at those who gave indication in their lives of extraordinary devotion.

His parents who taught in their home so much of the truths of Scriptures, had as far as practical application was concerned, deprived their family of that which is so vitally important. In his early youth, Archibald had never heard about the necessity of a radical change of heart and mind.

The biographer tells us, "Of the two classes of professors in his native country, his father belongs to the more liberal and accommodating". He gives us also a particular instance describing how both his father and mother had a very negative influence upon him. This was at the time when a travelling minister had preached a very serious sermon. The preacher had given solemn warnings to flee the wrath to come.

This sermon had made a serious impression upon the young lad and caused him to be greatly concerned about his sinful condition before God. But when he came home, he heard his parents criticize the minister, and ridicule the sermon. This so affected the young Archibald, that the solemn convictions disappeared as snow from the sun.

No wonder that all throughout his lengthy ministry, Dr. Alexander has warned parents time and again not to criticize godly ministers, especially not in the presence of their children. He knew from his own experience how terrible an influence that can be. And many others can testify to that same truth. Let us be careful, if we do not want to be the instruments to drive our children away from the Truth.

3. At the Home of General Posey:

At the age of seventeen Archibald left his father's home and became the tutor of several children in the home of General Posey. This General had served in the Revolutionary War in the famous Morgan corps. It was in this home that the great change took place in the heart and life of Archibald Alexander. In the house of the general was also an elderly Christian lady - Mrs. Tyler - who became an invaluable friend to the young family tutor. This well informed and excellent woman took a great and sympathetic interest in the inexperienced young teacher. She corrected many of his opinions and guided him in the choice of useful books.

But her interest in him extended beyond his occupational affairs. She had a living concern for the boy's soul's welfare, and knew him to be ignorant of the one thing needful. She often spoke to him about the necessity of the new birth. At certain occasions she would relate her own religious experience. In early life she had been happy and fond of admiration. When the gospel was first preached in her vicinity, she used to go, but only for the purpose of ridiculing the ministers. But at one such occasion her peace of mind was effectually destroyed. She became deeply distressed about her sins, and was greatly troubled that she had no one to ask for advice. At length she came to the conclusion that she should be certainly lost. But when she reflected on the fact that souls in perdition would always blaspheme God, she felt that she could never do that. Whatever her lot would have to be, she desired for ever to bless God for His goodness. In this frame of mind, she found the plan of salvation by Christ opened to her view, and filled with admiration, she owned herself willing to take up the cross and follow Christ.

At this particular time she closed her conversation with the words, "Now I know all this must appear to be utter nonsense to you, who have felt nothing of the kind." Archibald was silent, but was deeply convinced, from the solemnity of her manner, that there was a reality in these things.

Mrs. Tyler did not frequently speak to him about his own particular case, but often talked to him about religious matters. She was a Baptist and in her opinion, the Presbyterians that she had met were sound in doctrine, but deficient in inward experience.

Archibald became greatly puzzled about what Mrs. Tyler had told him about the new birth. Many questions came to his mind, Was there really such a thing as the new birth? Why did he have to hear about this from a Baptist? How could it be, if there was truly something like the new birth, that he had never heard any of the Presbyterians speak about this? "I seemed to be in the Bible, but I thought there must be some method of explaining it away; for among the Presbyterians I had never heard of any who had experienced the new birth."

Mrs. Tyler understood the young Presbyterian in his perplexities. She was convinced that this was not something just peculiar to the Baptists, but that there were also many godly Presbyterian ministers who had the same views on the gospel of God's grace. She had too much evidence for that in her own library. For she had many books of good

Presbyterians who emphasized the same precious truths. Among others she possessed the works of John Flavel. She had the wisdom to let the youthful Presbyterian inquirer read them.

Learning that Flavel was a Presbyterian, he tried to find out what his views were on regeneration. To his great surprise they were much in harmony with what Mrs. Tyler had told him. Then he came to the conclusion that this was thus really something that did not merely concern the Baptists, but that there were good and respectable Presbyterians who held the same views. So it was that the works of Flavel became a tremendous influence in his life. Here are his own words again, "To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author."

On Sabbath evenings the family of General Posey - this was suggested by Mrs Tyler - would come together for religious worship. At such occasions one of Flavel's sermons would be read, and the family tutor was in charge of the reading. At one time he selected one of the sermons on Rev. 3:20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock", etc. This was a sermon on the patience, forbearance and kindness of the Lord Jesus Christ to impenitent and obstinate sinners.

Here is his own account of what happened, "As I proceeded to read aloud, the truth took effect on my feelings, and every word I read seemed applicable to my own case. Before I finished the discourse, these emotions became too strong for restraint, and my voice began to falter. I laid down the book, rose hastily, and went out with a full heart, and hastened to my place of retirement.

No sooner had I reached the spot than I dropped upon my knees, and attempted to pour out my feelings in prayer; but I had not continued many minutes in this exercise before I was overwhelmed with a flood of joy. It was a transport such as I had never known before, and seldom since. I have no recollection of any distinct views of Christ; but I was filled with a sense of the goodness and mercy of God; and this joy was accompanied with a full assurance that my state was happy, and that if I was to die, I should go to heaven. This ecstasy was too high to be lasting, but as it subsided, my feelings were calm and happy. It soon occurred to me that possibly I had experienced the change called the new birth."

This is by no means the end of Dr. Alexander's struggle to understand the true meaning of that birth that is from above. But this will - I trust - give the reader some indication of his difficulties and also some insight as to how he began to understand these great things for himself.

During his ministry to the Students of Princeton University, there was a remarkable awakening. One of the fruits of his labours at that time was the conversion of Charles Hodge, who is still famous for his great work on Systematic Theology.

HOW MUST WE COME TO CHRIST? by Archibald Alexander

How must we come? Not by a bodily approach, for this is impossible. Where Christ now is we cannot come: and a local approach, if it were practicable, would be useless. Many came near to the Saviour, when he sojourned on earth, who never derived any benefit from Him. His worst enemies and murderers came in contact with Him, when they seized, bound, buffeted, scourged, and crucified the Lord; and the traitor Judas lived in His family, and travelled in His company for years, and kissed Him in Gethsemane; but this will only serve to render his doom the more intolerable. It had been better for that man never to have seen Jesus - yea, never to have been born.

Coming to Christ is undoubtedly an act of the rational soul, irrespective of the body. It is a spiritual approach, in which the Saviour is apprehended by the enlightened mind in His true character. It is a full persuasion that He is indeed the Son of God, and the Saviour of the lost. It is the act of a convinced, distressed soul, flying from the coming wrath, to take shelter under the outstretched wings of His mercy. It is an exercise of humble confidence in the Redeemer of sinners, that He will deliver it from all the evils which are felt or feared. There is nothing difficult in this act to the soul under the influence of the Holy Spirit; nor does it require a long time. It is executed as quick as thought. It is nothing else but the soul's cordial consent to receive Christ as a complete and only Saviour. The weary and heavy-laden sinner, when almost overwhelmed with the burden of his guilt, having sought relief from other quarters, at length hears the kind invitation of Jesus, "Come unto Me"; and being enabled to give full credit to the truth and sincerity of the call, and to see the excellency and suitableness of Christ as a divine Saviour; and being persuaded, that every blessing needed to secure eternal salvation, is treasured up in Him, receives Him, as He is freely offered in the gospel, and willingly commits all its immortal interests into His hands; and resolves to submit to Him and obey Him, in all time to come.

In all this the soul, though operated on by an Almighty power, is conscious of no restraint, unless it be the sweet constraint of the love of Christ. There is indeed an irresistible drawing towards Christ, but the more powerful it is, the more freely does the soul seem to act. Under the sweet influence of grace, the affections spontaneously go forth to Him, Who appears altogether lovely; and the weary soul experiences a sweet rest by casting all its burdens on the Lord.

The principal act of faith is an act of trust. "Blessed are all they that trust in Him." And having once tasted this blessedness of confiding in Christ, we never think of seeking any other refuge. The believer is not only persuaded that He is the way, but the only way. On this account He is prized above all price. "To you who believe, He is precious." Well may the name of Jesus sound sweet to the believer's ear, because there is "no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

No wonder that He values above rubies, or kingdoms, that elect and precious cornerstone - though rejected by the proud and self-righteous - which God had laid in Zion, because he is sure that it is a safe foundation on which to build for eternity; and because he is persuaded "that other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus."

Coming to Christ is not an act to be performed only once, but is to be continually repeated. Every day we need His aid. And every hour we should have recourse to Him by some confiding or grateful act. This access once obtained, the intercourse should be continually kept open. He allows His disciples the privilege of friends, to come with freedom and confidence to His throne of grace, "to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

So intimate and endearing is the intercourse between Christ and believers, that there is a mutual indwelling. Christ in them, the hope of glory - and they in Christ as members of His body, or as branches engrafted into Him, the true Vine.

But, perhaps the anxious inquirer still asks, "How must I come?" To which I answer - come poor and naked, and helpless, and unworthy - come renouncing all dependence on your own righteousness. If you attempt to come with a price in your hand, you will be rejected. Christ must be acknowledged and received as our only Saviour.

He will have nothing to do with those who place any confidence in their own works, or in their religious privileges. He will not save you on account of your natural amiableness; or on account of your moral honesty, or diligent attention to external duties. You cannot in these respects go beyond the rich young ruler in the gospel, and yet he "lacked one thing", and that was the main thing. In the punctilious observance of external duties and rites, you cannot exceed the Scribes and Pharisees, and yet your righteousness must exceed theirs, or you can never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You must come to Christ for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. As long as sinners think that they are "rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing," they will not come to Christ; but when they are convinced that they are "poor, and wretched, and blind and naked," they will be inclined to hear His counsel, and come unto Him, "to buy gold tried in the fire that they may be rich, eye salve that they may see, and white raiment that they may be clothed, and that the shame of their nakedness appear not."

In short, delay not, that you may make yourselves better, or prepare your hearts for the reception of Christ, but come at once - come as you are. If you are sick, apply at once to the Physician. If you are defiled, come to the Fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. If you are burdened with guilt, come to a crucified Saviour, Whose blood cleanses from all sin. If you are miserable, Christ promises you rest if you will come to Him.

Are you kept back by a deep sense of unworthiness? This is the very reason why you

should come. Christ came to save **sinners**. The deeper your guilt, the greater your need of just such a Saviour. He saves none because their sins are great.

He is as willing to receive the penitent who is the chief of sinners, as the amiable youth whose life has been stained with no acts of gross transgression. Where sin has abounded, grace shall much more abound. "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom," says Paul, "I am chief." Come then with confidence, trusting in that great assurance, "Him that cometh, I will in no wise cast out."

But as your case is urgent and dangerous, let me entreat you to come speedily. Make no delay. In such a case, delays are dangerous. **Now** is the accepted time. **Now** is the day of salvation. Enter while the door of mercy is open. Work out your salvation while it is day, before the night cometh when no work can be done. And the work which you are required to perform, is to believe on Him Whom God hath sent. You have no need to leave your seat to perform this act. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

Help is near. The Deliverer is present. Application to Him is as easy now as it ever can be. Take words and return unto Him. Fall down before Him with confession and humble supplication; "for he that calleth on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Venture on Him, for you are perishing where you are, and you will but perish if He should slay you. But if you are rejected and spurned from His feet, you will be the first that has thus perished; for God cannot lie, and He has promised to receive the soul that comes.

(This article is taken from the author's sermon on Matthew 11:28, "**Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.**")

QUESTIONS BEFORE THE COMMUNION

by James W. Alexander

Have I seen myself to be, by nature and by practice, a lost and helpless sinner?
Have I seen not only the sinfulness of particular acts and omissions, but that my heart is a seat and fountain of sin, and that in me, as unrenewed, there is no good thing?
Has a view of this led me to despair of help from myself, and to see that I must be altogether indebted to Christ for salvation, and to the gracious aid of the Holy Spirit from strength and ability to perform my duty?
On what is my hope of acceptance with God founded?
On my reformation? on my sorrow for sin? on my prayers? on my tears? on my good works and religious observances? or on **Christ alone**, as my all in all?
Has Christ ever appeared very precious to me?
Have I ever felt great freedom in committing my soul to Him?
If I have done this, has it been not only to be delivered from the punishment due to sin, but also from the power, pollution, dominion and very existence of sin within me?
Do I hate all sin, and desire to be delivered from it, without any exception of a favourite lust?
Do I pray much to be delivered from sin?
Do I strive against it?
Do I avoid temptation?
Do I, in any measure, obtain the victory over sin?
Have I so repented of it, that my soul is really set against it?
Have I counted the cost of following Christ, or of being truly religious?
Am I ready to be cut off from vain amusements, from the indulgence of my lusts, and from a sinful conformity to the world?
Can I face ridicule, contempt, and serious opposition?
In the view of these things, am I willing to take up the cross, and to follow Christ whithersoever he shall lead me?
Is it my solemn purpose, in reliance on his gracious aid, to cleave to him and to his cause and people, to the end of life?
Do I love holiness?
Do I earnestly desire to be more and more conformed to God and to His holy law, to bear more and more the likeness of my Redeemer?
Am I resolved, in God's strength, to endeavour conscientiously to perform my whole duty, to God, to my neighbour, and to myself?
Do I make conscience of secret prayer daily?
Do I ever experience delight in it?
Have I a set time, and place, and order of exercises for performing this duty?
Is it my purpose, as the head of a household, to maintain the worship of God in my family, every morning and evening?
Do I read a portion of the Holy Scriptures every day in a devout manner?

Do I love the Bible? Do I ever perceive a sweetness in its truths? Do I find them suited to my necessities, and do I at times see a wonderful beauty, excellence, and glory in God's Word? Do I take it as "the man of my counsel," and endeavour to have both heart and life conformed to its requisitions?

Have I given myself to God, solemnly and irrevocable, hoping for acceptance through Christ alone, and taking God in Christ, as the covenant God and satisfying portion of my soul? Does the glory of God appear to me the first, greatest, and best of all objects?

Have I such a love to mankind as was unknown to me before? Have I a great desire that the souls of men should be saved, by being brought to the Redeemer? Do I feel a peculiar love to God's people, because they bear their Saviour's image? Am I in charity with every brother-professor? If not, have I made endeavours to be reconciled? Do I from the heart forgive all who have injured me? Do I desire and endeavour to grow in grace and in knowledge of Christ my Saviour, more and more? Am I willing to sit at his feet as a little child, and to submit my understanding implicitly to his teaching, imploring his Spirit to guide me into all necessary truth, to save me from all fatal errors, to enable me to receive the truth in the love of it, and to transform me more and more into a likeness of Himself?

Do I love the Lord Jesus Christ? Do I especially love Him as dying for my sins? Do I desire to remember Him, in this dying love, at His table? Am I sufficiently acquainted with the nature and design of this sacrament? Have I carefully considered the history of our Lord's sufferings, in the four Gospels? Have I diligently read the accounts of this institution in the New Testament? Am I ready as a sinner redeemed by this blood, to go to this ordinance? Am I desirous of communion with Christ's people? Am I willing to submit myself to the government and discipline of the Church? Do I feel it to be important to adorn religion by a holy, exemplary, amiable, and blameless walk? Do I fear to bring a reproach on the cause of Christ? Am I afraid of backsliding, and of being left to return to a state of carelessness and indifference in religion? Have I any sufficient reason for postponing the profession of my faith? And what is my duty, in consideration of the possibility that I may be summoned into eternity before another communion season?