

True Devotion

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[0 : 00] Now, brothers and sisters, let us sober down and give our minds and our hearts to some serious business.

As Alexandra said in her rather overwhelming introduction, I took the title True Devotion from a book.

Yes, here it is. It was sent me, oh, I don't know, two months ago, I suppose, three months ago, something like that. True Devotion by Alan Chappell, published by the Latimer Trust, anchored in London, England, subtitled In Search of Authentic Spirituality.

It's a rather misleading subtitle, I think, because it's a presentation of authentic spirituality rather than a search for it.

And these days, the world of books, theological books, is cumbered by books that really are searching for authentic spirituality on the supposition that nobody at the moment knows what authentic spirituality is.

[1 : 28] Well, Alan Chappell believes that he does know, and I, having read the book, agree, indeed he does.

I thought it was a very fine book. I want to recommend it to you. And I'll tell you simply that it's stocked by the Regent College bookstore.

And if, let me say it this way, if you want to follow up what I say in this talk, by some good, solid, appropriate reading, well, this, I think, is the book to go on to.

True Devotion by Alan Chappell. My life, as a matter of fact, which is a fairly, how can I say, a fairly extensive one so far, my life has seen an emergence of spirituality as an academic subject in the world of theology, theology, and a practical subject in many local churches, whereas when I was a kid, nobody knew the word, and the reality was not studied at all.

And when I got to theological college, Wycliffe College, Oxford, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, as it was in those days, the same applied amongst the things that we were taught.

[3 : 23] Spirituality, spirituality, or spiritual theology, as it's called now, didn't appear. I suppose it was taken for granted that you wouldn't be coming to theological college to prepare for ministry unless you'd already got the truth about spiritual life under your belt, shall I say.

But things have changed. Perhaps, I'm not sure about this, but perhaps I had something to do with the change, because when I became a faculty member in Trinity College Bristol, I insisted on being allowed to teach a course that was required of everybody on, and this was actually the title that I used, the theology of the Christian life.

Why? Well, I thought that everyone who is preparing for ministry needs to study the doctrine of the Christian life and know something about the theology that's involved and be prepared to spell it out without hesitation when asked about it.

And when I came to Regent College, I was very interested to find that Dr. Houston, the founder, the founder-principal, had himself taken on the study of spiritual theology and was already teaching it on the ground that every Christian needs to be properly instructed in the matter.

I say the matter. I'll go on talking about spirituality and spiritual theology, but this is the moment perhaps to say that the old name for this topic and this theme was simply, and this is a phrase that will not be strange to you, communion with God.

[5 : 38] That's what it's all about. Communion with God, which is something that the Church has been explicitly proclaiming, really, ever since the early centuries.

Well, Dr. Houston had already taken up the academic study of spiritual theology, and one of the things that he and I did together during the years that we were full faculty members at Regent was a seminar on traditions of Christian spirituality, in which, may I say, we both of us very much enjoyed ourselves, mainly, I suppose, because we were sharing an enthusiasm and discovering that more and more of our students were beginning to share it.

Well, anyway, that's the prehistory of Packer pontificating on spirituality.

When I was required to give an inaugural lecture in the professorship that I finally held, I gave it on I called it actually Introduction to Systematic Spirituality, and I have been pursuing as one of my interests attempts to expound aspects of authentic spirituality for many years now, and when this book came my way, and I read it and found it was good, and then, almost immediately, found myself asked if I would give the last talk in this season of Learners' Exchange

Addresses. I found myself wanting to take up the topic and share with you some of the things that I've been seeking to share wherever it was possible to do that.

[8 : 06] Things that I've been seeking to share for, well, it's getting on for half a century now. So, that is, I think, insufferably egocentric, so let me turn your minds back to this book by Alan Chappell and read you some sentences from the back jacket, sentences which I think provide a very good launch pad for the material that I'm going to present.

Having said that devotion, the word used in the title, is covering the ground of what is sometimes called spirituality and piety, the writer says all three words are used in this book and in each case we are talking about how we relate to God, that is, how we express and exercise personal relationship with him.

The aim is to examine what the Bible teaches about knowing God and living with him. Why true devotion?

Why that adjective? Well, for two reasons. First, we must be truly devoted to God. Our relationship with him must be real and deep.

And second, we must be devoted to him truly. That is, our devotion must be grounded in and governed by the truth.

[10 : 07] That is, the teaching of the Bible. And one of the things that the writer of this book does so extremely well is to nail some of the inappropriate, indeed, incorrect notions of spiritual life and true devotion that have crept into the church in recent years.

ways. Well, all of that is by way of introduction. Now we are going to turn to the scriptures ourselves, and before I go any further, I ask you to pray with me that we shall all be given light as we do that.

So, please, let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, grant us, we pray, the help of your Holy Spirit that we may understand the things that we are going to explore from your Holy Word and, being enlightened, find ourselves able to live in the power of your light, your Holy Spirit, your Word, and, on the other hand, able to share these things with those to whom we have opportunity to share them once we know what we are talking about.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. my talk falls into two parts.

Part one, the basis of true devotion. Part two, expressions of true devotion. Part one, the basis of true devotion.

[12 : 14] We need to understand three things, and I will express my view here, that we simply cannot get on without this understanding.

I say this with some emphasis, because, even among evangelical folk, I find that there's a good deal of talk about spirituality and devotion that goes on, without these three things being adequately understood, and consequently, what is said about true devotion doesn't come up to the mark.

You say, what are the three things that you regard as needing to be understood? First, the authority of Scripture for our relationship with God.

This is familiar ground to us, surely, here at St. John's, so I need to say very little about it.

Scripture is the word of God. Scripture is as truly divine utterance as it is human writing. Scripture is a story from God, about God, about God in this world, in the life of his people, the Bible, which consists of 66 books, each very different from the others, the Bible tells us the story, explains it, models responsibility in the responsibility of being an actor in this, or an agent in the story, or generally responding to the story, and through the Holy Spirit, whose ministry is linked with the word of

[14 : 27] God, Scripture applies all these things to the reader, that's you and me, searches our hearts with them, and exposes us to ourselves as we are before God, so that we may become real, that is realistic, in our devotion, based as it will be on the teaching of Scripture, according to that well-known text that I'm sure you could all of you recite if I asked you to, 2 Timothy chapter 3:16, which in the English Standard Version goes thus, all Scripture is breathed out from God, and is profitable for teaching, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of

God, that is, any and every servant of God, may be mature, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So, we need to understand the authority of Scripture, and to have a working acquaintance with the Bible's contents, that's the first thing.

Second thing, we need to understand the centrality of the Lord Jesus in all the purposes of God. The name Jesus, as we know, is the human name, the personal name, that was given to the Son of God, actually, by his Father, the sinner sent the message through the angel Joseph, you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Jesus means God as a name, means God is Savior. But the name was given to him at his incarnation, and the name given to, well, the name or the description given to him as the divine person, that he eternally was, is, and ever will be, is the name Son, Son of God.

[17 : 11] And the phrase Son of God introduces us to the thought of the plurality of persons, the Trinity in other words, as the form of God's eternal existence, and the image of the Son, the word or the word, in relation to the Father, points to the second person of the Trinity as the agent of the first, doing the will of the first, fulfilling the plan of the first.

So, this is how we should understand Jesus' place, in all the purposes of God. He is the means whereby they are brought to fruition, one way or another, and he is the focus of the glory that's achieved by their performance.

and so, we find that Paul, in Colossians chapter 1 verses 16 and following, says in four verses enough about the Son to take our breath away, really.

all of this is true, and all of this would take whole books to expand properly. He, the Son, is the image of the invisible God.

I jump now. He is before, well, oh no, I'm sorry, I'll go back a bit, and all things were created through him and for him.

[19 : 22] Note that for him, he always was the center, in an important sense, of the created universe, and still is, and when the new creation comes, nothing will change, he forever will be.

All things were created through him and for him, for the Father loves the Son, commits everything to the Son, and wants the Son to be exalted.

The exaltation of the Son brings exaltation to the Father and joy to the Father also. Sorry, I get moved away from the text that I intended to read the whole thing before I made any comments on it.

all things were created through him and for him, and he is before all things and in him, all things hold together.

So, you see what this means, the very fact that you and I exist and our existence is stable and we're sitting in a classroom here in this church building and you are sitting listening and I am standing talking.

[20 : 43] All that reflects the fact that the Son of God is actively upholding everything in existence this very moment and every other moment past, present and future.

In him all things hold together, that's what it means. The same is true of everything in the cosmos without exception.

and he is the head of the body, the church. A moment ago I was talking about his upholding of everything in creation.

Now Paul moves us on to Jesus as the head, that is the control center of the body, the church, the community of which through faith you and I are part.

The community which on earth at the moment contains more than two billion members and of course that doesn't include all the saints already in glory who are part of the church just as much as we are part of the church.

[22 : 02] church. But that's the body of which the Lord Jesus is the head. This is an image of course, the image is an analogy.

The analogy is that there is a bond of union between every single Christian that has ever been, between every single one of us in this room and every other Christian all around the world that ever will be, there is a bond between each of us and the Lord Jesus.

That's an overwhelming thought which the New Testament, well, Paul and John in the New Testament specifically, express by the use of a simple phrase, so simple that we skate over it regularly without thinking what it means.

The phrase is in Christ. We are all in Christ. We are all bonded to Christ. We are all units in the body of which he is the head.

And so we are all limbs in the body of Christ, or I said units. Units is better than limbs because units covers all the nerves and the ligaments as well as the bones.

[23 : 35] We are bonded to each other in Christ, just as we are all bonded individually to Christ. I haven't finished my reading either.

I go on. He, this is the Son, the Word, he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent, center of the cosmos, center of or head of the church, the focus right at the heart of things, both the created order and the redemptive order.

for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The word fullness there is a word which Paul picks up from the Colossian heresy, there was a Colossian heresy, and it made, the heretics made great play with the thought that we are telling you about the fullness of God, which is more than the Christian gospel does.

Paul counters that by saying, in effect, there is nothing that we need to know about the cosmos, that the Christian gospel doesn't actually tell us, and that the Christ whom we preach as the focus of the gospel doesn't actually hold together in person as part of the reality of things.

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

[25 : 40] I'm not going to attempt to expound that verse in a nutshell because it would take me more time than I've got to give. I'm reading these verses in order to impart to you Paul's thought that the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as he now is, is the center of everything, and when you say, or he says, everything, he means, and following him, we should mean everything.

Everything. It's an overwhelming thought, and having given it to you, as best I can verbalize it, I must leave it to you to be overwhelmed by it, shall I say, for the rest of your life, here on earth, and then in glory, as we most certainly shall be overwhelmed by it, in glory.

And it's for us to get used to the thought here on earth. well, Paul in particular expresses some of this by the use of the phrase in Christ, as we've already said, and he, with other New Testament writers, expresses other aspects of the thought by the phrase through Jesus Christ.

All the life, and all the blessing, and all the salvation, and all the glory that comes to us, comes to us through Jesus Christ, in whom we have our life, and in whom we are bonded, both to him and to each other.

that, I'm afraid, is a rather garbled account of the centrality of Jesus in all the purposes of God, but at least that gives you the sketch, and you and I need to understand this, at least in sketch terms, as a basis for true devotion in our daily lives.

[28 : 15] And that leads on to the third thing that we need to understand, namely, our own identity as believers through God's grace to us as sinners.

Our story in this world starts with our being sinners by nature. We inherit original sin from Adam, sin, and we commit sins in expression of our natural sinful condition, and we are currently under God's judgment in our natural condition because of our sins and our sinfulness, and we are facing executive judgment at some point in the future which will award us, unless there's an intervention of course, the judgment will award us what we deserve for voluntarily, cheerfully, being what we are, sinning, sin, sorry, sinful sinners.

That's what I should say. But now, the New Testament Gospel centers on a reality which is referred to as the grace of God.

It's a Greek word, charis. The word in pre-New Testament times meant gracefulness in the sense of elegance.

gracefulness but the New Testament writers pick it up and run with it and give it a new sense which it didn't bear before, and surely we know that new sense.

[30 : 18] Love to the unlovely in active expression, goodwill to those who have no good will by nature towards God and who need to be totally renewed.

Grace is God in action doing just that through faith which is a relational response to God's movement towards us in grace.

And God's movement towards us in grace is a team job and as soon as it begins to be expanded we see that the father sends the son to be the savior of the world.

The father loves us, the son loves us, the son does the will of God redemptively and as the son draws towards the time and the moment when he must leave this world he speaks very fully about a person of the Holy Spirit who is coming he says to carry on ministry that he has begun towards people.

This third person the Holy Spirit is as I say the son's agent and the son's successor and we soon realize as we move into the epistles and indeed the book of the Acts before the epistles the Holy Spirit is involved in the project which the father and the son hitherto have been revealed as sustaining the project of salvation for needy sinners and it soon comes out in terms of the father above us and the spirit within us and the Lord Jesus Christ through the spirit beside us as he says in Matthew chapter 28 and verse 20

[32 : 56] I am with you always. So what have we got here? We've got grace through faith bringing home to us as individuals the relational response of believing the facts of the gospel and trusting the promises of the gospel and grace through faith bestows a new status a new state and a new surround of course new surroundings upon us a new status reconciliation or peace with God in place of alienation justification as it were in the divine law court the sentence that is of the last judgment as it affects us being passed on us in advance and the sentence is guilty as charge but not penally liable because of the cross of Christ the event of penal substitution as we call it he died for our sins now there's no death for you and me yes there's peace with God there's justification by grace and there's adoption into God's family and here may I say one cannot biblically go with those who love who desire to talk about adoption into God's family which in one way is the supreme blessing because it leads to the closest fellowship but they want to talk about adoption into God's family in terms of our being sons and daughters of God well in our 20th century 21st century sense sure that's true but in bible times it was sons not daughters who inherited and the the image of adoption the image that is of being sons of God is directly linked with being a joint heir with Jesus

Christ of the inheritance of glory which waits to be revealed so ladies you must be willing to be called sons of God by people like me who want to make the point that you with us male believers are joint heirs with Christ heirs of the fullness of the glory of God well forgive that forgive me for saying that which you may regard it as naughty well even even the best of sinners are naughty sometimes so on we go that's the new status and the new state is pictured again these are analogies it flows from the resurrection of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit whom the risen Lord sent at Pentecost for the fulfillment of the ministry he promised and the new state can be can be pictured or stated in terms of a new birth a new heart and a new strength clock is beating me so I can't go into those three categories as I'd like to they're all of them scriptural and they all of them speak of a new life beginning with new perceptions and new desires and a new community community that is with

Christ with the Father and out of all that a new strength for service ministry for making a difference for God in this world and I spoke of a new surroundings what was I thinking of there well I was thinking of two things the promises of God of the Father and the Son which give us our hope both in this world and in the world to come because God keeps his promises and I was thinking of the presence of the Lord Jesus with us we referred to it a moment ago he Matthew's gospel ends famous last words with Jesus saying to his disciples after his straight after his resurrection no I'm with you always even to the end of the world and he is with you and me always but again

I want to ask you whether this is something that you reckon with on a day to day basis in the way that we Christians should we are never alone through the spirit he is present with us always yes I know that in his glorified humanity he is not with us he is in the glory wherever that is but in his personal presence he is with us he is our companion in every moment of our lives and we should think often of that fact and rejoice in it and indeed again and again fellowship with him in what they sometimes call arrow prayers that's a different image of course the image of the arrow but prayers from the heart at the moment when you have to say something do something take a stand whatever it's going to be and you need the

Lord's help and strength and support in doing it but all of that is our identity as believers through grace and true devotion comes out of that identity we need to be clear on the fact that we are all of this in Christ through Christ under Christ for Christ and for the glory of his father with the son and with the holy spirit again I'm afraid I'm having to sketch these things in a garbled way because I'm trying to pack more into the time than there is time at my disposal it's inescapable I'm afraid so I'm not going to apologize for it

[41 : 00] I'm simply going to move on to the second part of my presentation expressions of true devotion true expressions of devotion following from the truths that we've been reviewing thus far in general the expressions of true devotion will take the form of faithful belief and obedient behavior or as scripture New Testament often says it take the form of faith with works the works being expressions of the faith specifically what's that going to involve praise and prayer to start with and praise and prayer both in public and in private in public in the church together with the rest of the saints who gather with us in the church for those purposes private praise and prayer well this is what we normally are referring to if we use the word devotion or the word spirituality

I haven't time to say all that I'd like to say or anything like all that I'd like to say about private devotion I'm going to give you some thoughts to conjure with and then hurry on first thought there's a common way of expressing teaching what's involved in private prayer the acronym is ACTS and the words are A for adoration C for consecration T for thanksgiving S for supplication for supplication there are set prayers set prayers which were used regularly in church services but we are encouraged by wise teachers to use them in our personal prayers as well and what they do is model for us verbally desires which we should have in

Christ and which we must learn to have in Christ that's the benefit that comes from praying specifically the weekly collects in the prayer book making them our own prayers the desires are the important thing there because each collect expresses what we as Christians should be desiring some aspect of it in a different way and then there are what I call need prayers where we tell the Lord like it is ask for help ask for support we are there expressing already desires that we actually have a sense of need where we're begging for his help in scripture there are any number of encouragements to us to express the desires and needs that we actually have in prayer to

God and our life of supplication in prayer therefore will include that just as it will include learning from said prayers what desires we should have every day of our lives and then when it comes to thanksgiving well why do we give thanks thanksgiving as an action in ordinary everyday life expresses appreciation and gratitude and that is what thanksgiving to God must express appreciation of what he's done for us gratitude to him for it and the life of thanksgiving should be a major ingredient in the life of devotion and

I want to ask you as I need to ask myself as we pass this point is there as much thanksgiving in our lives yours and mine this is in our own personal prayer now as there ought to be thanksgiving to our Lord for the blessings of every day thanksgiving to our Lord for the big blessings thanksgiving equally for the small ones thanksgiving and that's all that I have time to say about that beyond what I've already said true devotion involves love love and service love in the specific sense that the word bears in scripture again it's a word which existed in the

[47 : 48] Greek language with a different meaning before Christianity came along but which Christianity the New Testament indeed redefines it's the word agape we know the word I think that the best definition of agape that I have ever heard is that it's the desire and purpose of making someone great according to whatever form of greatness they need whether it's great good health or greatness in some other shape or form agape in this sense was being exercised by the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit in bringing salvation to us and agape in this sense is to be exercised by us in the fulfilling attempt to fill the two great commandments that the

Lord Jesus left us love God love your name time is gone so again I have to apologize I can't dwell on that much as I like to and then the final thing that true devotion involves and that I wish to mention is know knowing for the purpose of growing knowing scripture and knowing God through faith's dealings with the Father and the Son through the Spirit for the purpose of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ as 2 Peter chapter 3 and verse 18 calls on us to do grow in the grace and knowledge of our

Lord Jesus Christ those are the words with which Peter signs off last words as we've already said are weighty words and so put these things together by belief and behavior faith with works being expressed in praise and prayer plus love and service making others great glorifying God with great praise and helping others with great service and knowing for growing as we study they soak ourselves in the Bible and in the truths of the gospel these are the integral elements it seems to me of true devotion in its true expression and here

I would like as I sign off to refer you to something specific in Alan Chappell's true devotion he wakes us up by saying first of all never underestimate the importance of questions and he quotes a couplet from Roger Kipling perhaps you know it I keep six honest serving men they taught me all I knew their names are what and where and when and how and why and who bring those questions to scripture and extract from the passage that's before you the answer to them and you will be doing well he then spells this out the way that he finds it fruitful to do what does the passage tell me about the person and purposes and promises of

God what does it tell me about loving and serving God what does it tell me about loving and serving my neighbor what encouragements does it give me what warnings does it give me in the past I have taught a similar set of questions covering the same ground my set of questions was what does this passage tell me or show me about God about godliness about myself what is reflected here that helps me to know myself better and about today's tasks the things that I know I have to do today how am I to do them what will be involved in doing them and with each question one looks to the passage say it's a chapter or a couple of chapters that you're reading and see what the chapter has to say in answer to the questions time's gone and I can't say any more at this stage one thing

[53 : 56] I like about Chappell's book is that he says very forthrightly in modesty real modesty I see myself as a beginner that's all and I don't want you to see you my readers to see me and think of me as anything other than a beginner because it wouldn't be true and I simply want to echo those words and suggest if you will allow me to do it that really the this sort of modesty the sense that is that we're only just beginning in the practice of true devotion is something which ought to be there in all our hearts after all we do call ourselves learners don't we that's it friends godless