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AN  
**ESSAY**

ON THE  
BEST MEANS OF PROMOTING THE SPREAD

OF  
**Divine Truth**

IN  
THE UNENLIGHTENED VILLAGES

OF  
*GREAT BRITAIN.*

—◆—  
BY  
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BILLERICAY.



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## P R E F A C E.

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**I**N the month of January 1817, a Christian friend in London expressed his deep sorrow that so much ignorance and irreligion should overspread many parts of our own country. After mentioning some affecting instances in proof of his assertions, he earnestly requested me to write a paper, and insert it in some popular magazine, to excite attention to this object. I promised to take the proposal into consideration, and intimated a readiness to comply with my friend's request as soon as an opportunity could be found amidst the numerous avocations which occupied my time. The more this subject engaged my thoughts, the more was my mind impressed with its impor-

tance. In the month of May following, I was struck with a notice in the *Evangelical Magazine*, offering a premium of Twenty guineas for the best Essay on the means of spreading Divine Truth in the unenlightened Villages of Britain. This notice, from a benevolent person quite unknown to me, gave a fresh impulse to the suggestion of the friend above mentioned, and produced the Essay to which the offered premium was adjudged, and which is here given to the public. I sincerely wish the subject may call forth that attention which it certainly merits. “It is a subject,” says the worthy philanthropist who recently made this effort to rouse the public mind to it, “which has too long been comparatively unpopular, though in the strictest sense deserving every attention from British Christians, whether we regard the well-being of society, the increase of the church of Christ, or the more general diffusion of Christianity, with its blessings, over the world. From an enlightened peasantry, some of our most valuable home and foreign missionaries may hereafter be taken ;

as living instances of this kind gratify my recollection at this present moment.”

Those who live in such places as are favoured with the richest means of evangelical instruction, are with difficulty brought to believe the profound ignorance and wretchedness in which many districts of the country are involved. Let such, however, as are but little acquainted with this melancholy fact, make due inquiry into the moral condition of some counties in the north and west of England, and every doubt will be dispersed. Indeed, I think it a matter of great moment, that the true state of many of our unhappy countrymen should be more fully known. And when once the sphere of labour is opened, every effort should be made to cultivate it.

The following Essay has treated the subject rather generally than in the way of minute detail, I do however indulge a hope, that some who have had better means of informa-

tion, will more closely investigate its several branches, and find fit mediums for communicating the result of their inquiries to the world.

We ought undoubtedly, according to the old adage, to let charity begin at home ; but never be content that it should end there. The zealous Christian must be convinced that the most effectual way in which we can benefit our fellow men, is by communicating to them the knowledge of the gospel. Let this best species of charity, commencing its career in the auspicious clime of Britain, run through every parallel of latitude between the equator and the poles, and visit with its potent and cheering beams every tribe, and kindred, and nation of our fallen race.

AN

## ESSAY,

§c. §c.



A MAN of enlarged understanding and liberal spirit, cannot contemplate the noble institutions which have recently sprung up in the British empire, without feeling the liveliest emotions of pleasure. Poverty, sickness, and old age, have their appropriate asylums and resources. Charity, anxious to diminish the mass of human misery, has opened ten thousand channels through which to pour her sympathies and bounties. But the present age of benevolence is peculiarly distinguished by vigorous and persevering efforts to scatter the principles and blessings of pure religion among the people that know not God. The gospel is indeed a leaven, which, from the very nature of its essential ingredients, is calculated to spread. Christianity, as a system, issuing from the love of God, demonstrates at once its origin and its excellence, by kindling in the bosom of man an ardent love to his fellow men. It is difficult to conceive, how personal piety can flourish in those who discover a listless indifference to the spiritual welfare of others. And it is undoubtedly

among the most pleasing signs of the times in which we live, that a deep concern is excited to diffuse the light of divine truth among the ignorant and impenitent, both in our own country and in foreign lands. Numbers now living, can recollect a time when the whole body of Christians among us seemed sunk into a state of apathy and negligence. The pulse of holy zeal was scarcely felt to beat, and even after the vital energy received a strong stimulus in the metropolis, the heart of the British empire, it was long ere many of the paralyzed members began to move.

The formation of the London Missionary Society will be regarded by posterity as a most interesting era, from which to date the rapid progress of the gospel. That venerable society will be recognized as the parent of many other excellent institutions, which, imbibing its liberal spirit, and emulating its active diligence, have greatly contributed to promote the same grand object. A Christian within the last twenty years, cannot cast his eye over a map of the globe without new sensations of delight. To us, the study of geography has a charm unknown to our ancestors, while in tracing remote regions and savage climes, we mark not the fierce conqueror's blood-stained banner, but the peaceful standard of the cross, borne by men of apostolic fortitude and zeal, widely extending the glorious kingdom of Immanuel. We must be devoid of Christian principle, and dead to every generous sentiment, if we can remain unaffected with the labours of Missionaries, some of whom

are planting the germ of civilization on the icy hills of Greenland and Labrador, and some on the sultry plains of Africa; while others are giving the charter of evangelical liberty to the wretched slaves of the West Indies, or imparting the oracles of God to the swarming population of Hindoostan and China.

But while we listen to the call of foreigners, reiterating the plaintive accents, "Come over and help us," shall we be deaf to the cry of our own countrymen? Engaged in the work of enlightening the heathen, shall we forget the more powerful and pressing claims of our neighbours? While we exult in the triumphs of the gospel abroad, shall we be unconcerned about its prevalence at home? An inconsistency so glaring, would subject us to the keenest censure, and merit the severest reproach. Far be it from me to intimate, that an attention to foreign missions has occasioned the neglect of our own countrymen. On the contrary, I am persuaded, that the grand and combined efforts made to evangelize the heathen, have operated, by a sort of beneficial re-action, to produce uncommon exertions on behalf of those who most needed instruction among ourselves. True Christian zeal is always expansive. Never is this flame raised to a vehement intensity, without causing an enlivening glow in every direction.

It must be remembered, that before the rise of Missionary societies, we heard little of itinerant preaching, and nothing of systematic plans and active co-operation for educating the poor, and



disseminating among all classes the Holy Scriptures and religious tracts. Individuals, indeed, there were, who exerted themselves for these objects, but their sphere was extremely narrow and limited. A few old societies also existed, but they could never emerge into notice; they made no impression on the public mind—excited no strong emotion—produced no permanent all-pervading interest.

At the outset of missionary labours, it was said again and again—Your attempts to convert the heathen, must necessarily prove abortive. And strange to tell, many went even from the camp of Israel to sharpen their weapons among the Philistines, borrowing, from infidelity itself, arms to oppose the propagation of the gospel. Laodicean Christians, who could never be roused to contend earnestly *for* the faith, were, notwithstanding their sluggish temperament, chafed into something like zeal *against* the efforts made to diffuse it. With persons of this character, it was a favourite and frequent topic, that we might be more profitably employed in teaching the ignorant at home, than in christianizing the Hindoos and Hottentots. It is right to be taught or admonished even by an enemy; and it was soon perceived that the latter of these good works ought to be done, though the former should not be left undone. Many a benighted village in England has received the cheering beams of gospel day, through the ministrations of those who were first stirred from their slumber by the impulse of missionary zeal.

It is not exaggerating to say, that more has been done to disseminate the benefits of pure religion in our highly favoured land, within the last twenty years, than during thrice the same space of time at any former period ; yet still there is a vast field open before us for cultivation. Hundreds of villages have evangelical teachers, either constantly or occasionally proclaiming to them the glad tidings of salvation ; but there are also hundreds destitute of this invaluable privilege.

Will any call in question the truth of the last assertion? Alas! the melancholy fact is beyond dispute. Besides numerous remote hamlets, there are even populous towns and districts without the gospel. Such as have occasion to travel through the country, and are qualified to judge, may easily be satisfied on this point. Without making very minute enquiries, the aspect of immorality and profligacy will, almost to a certainty, indicate the absence of evangelical instruction. Where the word of God is not faithfully dispensed, and its influence felt, we uniformly find sabbath-breaking, profaneness, and excess, marking with darkest stains the character of the people. Is it possible for any one, who knows by experience the power and preciousness of divine grace, to witness such scenes without the deepest sorrow? Can a Christian enter a village, where, on the Lord's day, the church is almost empty, and all the public-houses are full—where Bibles are as scarce as gold, and blasphemies more common than bad pence—where the mass of vice is ever growing, and no

attempt is made to remove it, without being touched even to tears ? Nor is it enough to heave a sigh of lamentation, or breathe out a transient wish for the welfare of people so degraded and wretched. He who does not earnestly pray for them, and with his supplications, join his best endeavours to rescue them from ruin, has but a dubious claim to the honour of being called a disciple of Him, who went about doing good.

It may, indeed, be said, there is scarcely an obscure corner of the country in which the people have not a place of worship within a few miles of their dwellings. To this it is sufficient to reply, it is not a round of stated forms, nor a set of dry moral essays, under the name of sermons, which God blesses to effect the conversion of immortal souls, or build up his saints on their most holy faith. As well might we expect another Orpheus to make the woods and stones move at the sound of his music, as anticipate such results from such means. The cold precepts of Seneca, and the flowing periods of Cicero, delivered now in a Christian church, are no more able to warm the heart and work conviction in the conscience, than when they were first imparted in the schools of philosophy. The wisdom of this world, with all its imposing promises and pretensions, has never yet found a specific capable of reaching, much less removing, the radical malady of human nature. Experiments after experiments have proved utterly vain and fruitless ; yet still the delusion with many continues. Stale and insipid matter, bor-

rowed from the musty urns of Greece and Rome, is poured into moral pulpit lectures, prepared to reform mankind. If the subject were not too serious, we might be tempted to smile as we witness the process, and wait for the result. We might triumphantly ask, Where do the advocates of such a system show us the real good they have done? Where do they show us the demon of covetousness dispossessed, the spirit of revenge exorcised, or pride laid prostrate in the dust? Where do they point out the profligate reclaimed, the penitent comforted, or the savage transformed into a saint? These questions put the empty boasts of vain philosophy to the blush. We must seek, in those glorious doctrines which came down from heaven, though rejected and despised by the proud and self-righteous, the only remedy that can heal the deep disease of human nature. Here is the antidote which may be fully trusted, because it has been a thousand times tried. For proof of its efficacy we could appeal to facts recorded in the page of authentic history, and facts written in fair living epistles known and read by all men.

Do we deplore the ignorance, vice, and impiety, too visibly predominant in many of our hamlets and villages? And are we convinced that nothing but evangelical instruction can radically ameliorate their condition? It certainly then becomes an enquiry of the last importance to ascertain what are the best means of spreading the knowledge and influence of divine truth in such places.

Compared with the deep interest which this momentous enquiry involves, the literary and political questions that employ the pens of scholars and the tongues of statesmen dwindle into points of trivial consequence.

In the first class of means for the attainment of the end now proposed, must be mentioned the Preaching of God's Word, the institution of Sunday Schools, and the dissemination of Bibles and Religious Tracts.

It can scarcely admit a doubt, that in this enumeration, the preaching of the Word takes the precedence. It is an ordinance expressly of divine appointment. God, who originally put the treasure of revealed truth in earthen vessels, has, in every successive age, employed these frail and despised vehicles to communicate that treasure to the various tribes and families of men. The Redeemer, who commanded his apostles to publish the gospel to every creature, is pleased, even at this day, to bless the glad tidings to the salvation of perishing souls, chiefly through the instrumentality of his ministers. He who might have called and engaged angels in this work, chooses as his messengers men of like passions with us.

When any part of the country is found destitute of the means of grace, we are naturally led to enquire, whether from the neighbouring towns a few zealous and active ministers could not occasionally visit it, and preach the gospel there. A man of good pulpit talents, of respectable connections, and of excellent character in private life, has advantages for such an undertaking which a

stranger cannot possess. And surely no minister, however elevated the sphere in which he moves, can think it a degradation to descend and break the bread of life among the most humble and illiterate rustics. When the disciples of John were sent to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah or not, he directed them simply to relate to their master what they had witnessed. They had indeed to speak of miracles; but the close of the narration, the summit of the climax, exhibits an unparalleled display of condescension and benevolence:—"Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, *to the poor the gospel is preached.*" (Luke vii. 22.) If any public teacher of religion can view this striking picture, and be insensible to the fine finish which gives a peculiar interest to the whole piece, or practically disregards its obvious design, he is not actuated by the spirit of Jesus. The heathen philosophers looked down with scorn on the vulgar, and boasted that their temple of knowledge was not accessible to the common people; and Voltaire said, if he could bring kings and courts to embrace his system, with all the better sort, he should leave house-maids and shoemakers to the apostles.—A Christian teacher is of another spirit.

I am well aware how many arduous duties, connected with his own charge, a stated pastor, in a great town, has to perform; yet, if he can but preach once or twice a month, in country places,

a few miles distance, it is impossible to calculate the good which may result from it.

While on a mild summer evening, he stands up, sometimes in a barn, and at other times in the open air, surrounded with a large assembly of plain mechanics and labourers, is it not delightful to behold their eager eyes fixed on the speaker, and to hear from their lips the solemn melody of praise? Can the man of God, the messenger of Christ, witness such a scene without being filled with unusually tender and ardent feelings? As he looks upon the pressing throng, he silently says within himself, Is there here a daring profligate rushing blindly forward in the broad way? Alas! there is but a step between him and death, and only another short step between death and the dungeon of despair! Is there here a self-righteous formalist, reclining at ease on mistaken notions and external rites? Alas! he is dreaming of heaven at the very threshold of hell! Oh, if the one should be stopped in his mad career, and the other awakened from his fatal slumber—if the arrows of conviction should pierce their hearts, and the force of truth break asunder the bonds of iniquity; surely all must exclaim—"This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes;" and even the angels of light must burn with more intense rapture when they hear the intelligence. While a minister is revolving in his mind such grand and awful ideas, such deeply affecting thoughts, and such sublime and animating hopes, he can hardly fail to address the audience with a