

**A SERMON, PREACHED AT THE
ORDINATION OF THE REV. OLIVER
STEARNS: TO THE
PASTORAL CARE OF THE SECOND
CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY IN
NORTHAMPTON, NOV. 9, 1831**

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A Sermon, Preached at the Ordination of the Rev. Oliver Stearns: To the Pastoral Care of the Second Congregational Society in Northampton, Nov. 9, 1831 by Convers Francis

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MR. FRANCIS' SERMON,

At the Ordination of

REV. OLIVER STEARNS.

1831

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SERMON,

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OF

THE REV. OLIVER STEARNS,

TO THE PASTORAL CARE

OF THE

Second Congregational Society

IN NORTHAMPTON,

NOV. 9, 1831.

BY **CONVERS FRANCIS,**

Minister of the Congregational Society in Watertown.

NORTHAMPTON:
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1831.

ORDINATION SERMON.

JOHN vi, 63.

It is the Spirit that quickeneth ; the flesh profiteth nothing ; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

If one were required to describe, in a single sentence, the nature of the religious dispensation established by Jesus, he might best do it by saying, that Christianity is an interior principle of moral life. It is never understood, and never known, as it ought to be, until it presents itself to the mind simply in this character, divested of the drapery which man has thrown around it. Such did our Saviour declare it to be in the passage I have just read. It is familiarly known to you, that the views of his countrymen concerning that long wished for personage, the Messiah, were of a false and worldly character,—that they looked for one, who should build up the fallen greatness and power of the chosen people, and no longer suffer the Roman eagle to spread his wings over Mount Zion. Indeed their general habits of thinking on religious subjects were exceedingly poor, narrow, and low ;—for their minds dwelt in externals, and were fast bound to the childish things of sense. It was in contrast with such idle expectations, and such unworthy views, that our Saviour, in my text, described the nature of his religion, as a life-giving and soul-purifying power. He came, not to minister to their vain and foolish hopes of national greatness, but to open to their hearts an avenue for “ the hope

full of immortality,"—not to flatter and encourage, but to elevate and enlarge their low conceptions. His system was to be no dead letter, no outward form, no call to the restless spirits of a subjugated people to flock around his standard: no, he was to found an empire over the heart and soul; he was to set up a moral reign over the spirit of man. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life."

From the spirit of this declaration, I have thought, may be gathered some reflections not inappropriate to the present occasion. When we are about to sanction, with the solemnities of religion, the consecration of a brother to the cares and the pleasures of ministerial duty, to introduce and to welcome another laborer to the field, on which seeds are to be sown and a harvest to be gathered that belong to eternity, we may profitably attend to our Saviour's declaration concerning the nature of that religion, for the interests of which the ministry was instituted. The subject, accordingly, to which I ask your attention, is *the character of Christianity as a purely internal and spiritual principle.*

If we examine, with careful observation, the various forms and modifications in which religion has appeared in the world, we cannot fail to remark how much men have loved the outward, and how little they have understood or cared for the inward. I do not mean merely, that there has been always a great passion for imposing ceremonies, but that in general, all those expedients, by which the work of religion is done abroad and out of the heart, have usually been in high favor. Amidst the striking varieties of thought and customs with regard to sacred subjects, there has ever been one great and leading division,—the division into those who have taken the exterior for every thing, and those who have taken it for little or nothing,—the short-sighted, who are satisfied and charmed with vain pomp and busy stir, and the searching minds, who are too sober to be entranced by modes, or forms, or bustle,—the ignorant, who dwell for-

ever in circumstances, and never penetrate beyond the shell or the frame work in which spiritual truth is enclosed,—and the enlightened, who look for it beyond all the avenues and preparations men have contrived, who find it dwelling apart and in simplicity, and go there to hold converse with it,—in short, the captives of sense, and the freemen of thought. Among all the confused and fluctuating notions of mankind, you may always trace the line that has marked out this radical distinction. Thus in the pagan world of old, the worship of the gods, by means of showy ceremonies, was made imposing to overawe and gay to attract; fables and mysteries were gathered around sacred things, that the community might have something tangible and stirring; festivals created and gratified the passion for excitement, and omens and divinations furnished superstition with the food she always craves. But all along, there was a class, small in number indeed, who thought of these things very much as enlightened men think of them now, who stood aloof from these vanities on the mount of illumination, who saw some of the pure forms of simple truth and loved them, who communed with their own spirits, and found there the living principle standing forth in its heavenly beauty, who, as far as they went, belonged to the great general order of true believers, worthy of a Christian's praise, inasmuch as they had visions, however defective, of the true and the spiritual. So likewise it was with the ancient Hebrews. Their system was surrounded and guarded by a cumbersome and unwieldy ritual; it was in a great degree bound up in forms and ordinances; for when their polity was instituted by their great lawgiver, they were at that low stage of mental culture, in which a people always need to have religion presented to them in connexion with a long array of positive and outward observances; the consequence was, that it frequently degenerated, as their own history testifies, into a service of the hands and the lips, into something which could be measured by times and quan-

titles, which was attached to days and shows, and required certain acts to be performed in its honor, like the homage paid to an Eastern prince. Still, there were among them men who had nobler gifts and a better sight, who lifted the veil and looked into the interior of divine things, who knew that many of the prescriptions of the Mosaic institutions were necessary only because the nation was not wise enough to receive any thing better, and who rebuked indignantly the gross abuses that sprung up among their people. A similar distinction has existed under Christianity. At first, it was proclaimed and received simply as a living principle of moral and spiritual improvement; and such it remained for the most part in the days of its poverty and persecution. But when it was brought forth out of tribulation into strength and prosperity, when it came to stand even by the side of the throne, and was patronised by the powerful, then it began to be less regarded as a kingdom of righteousness within the soul; then men began to disrelish its spiritual simplicity, and to be desirous of building up outworks around it for ornaments and for resting-places. The taste for externals increased, till it produced abuses scarcely outdone by those of paganism or Judaism. Saints were multiplied to take the place of heathen deities; a great machinery to operate upon the senses and the passions was set in motion; processions and pilgrimages, the crucifix and the frankincense, bowings and prostrations, made up the service of God; and from the beginning to the end of the year, the whole was a scene of parade, which men will call magnificent or childish, according to the associations they may have been accustomed to connect with it. Thus it was, and is now, in the largest part of Europe under the old church. Under the new, or Protestant church, the same disposition is developed in other forms, not so obvious and palpable, but belonging almost as much to the mere exterior. Instead of the Virgin Mary, and days of fasting and feasting, and holy water, and relics of saints, and other kin-

dred things, we have different arrangements for providing outward excitements ; we have for this purpose modes of superstition, which, if they are less ludicrous, are more stern and uncompromising than the old modes ; we have the visions and pratings of fanaticism without the venerable character in which it once clothed itself ; we have solemn commotions and consecrated devices, which serve to keep men in externals nearly as well as shows and pilgrimages did in days of yore ; we have the traditions of other ages and the speculations of heated or wandering minds to be contended for under the name of doctrines ; we have the spirit of proselytism and party to exercise and gratify the energies of spiritual pride ; we have wide-reaching plans to employ the restless spirits who are more busy than useful, and more zealous than wise ; we have arts for swelling the influence and numbers of a sect, and the diseased craving for the excitement of frequent meetings ; we have names to be given out as watch-words and to be known by as badges, and other like things, which sufficiently indicate, that the form is changed, rather than the thing, and that, if the disposition to connect external bustle with religion be checked in one direction, it will shoot forth and display itself in some other direction. Yet there has always been, both in the old church and in the new, a class of deeper thinkers and better minds, who have loved the spirit far more than the letter—who have gone beyond the outward form, and seen and cherished the inward power. Among the Catholics, this class was at times large and important ; and in some instances, by a very natural reaction, they passed to the opposite extreme, as in the strange reveries, the visionary quietism, and the striving after an absorption in the pure love of infinite beauty, which were set forth and inculcated by Madame Guyon, and even by the pious, amiable, and highly gifted Fenelon. Nor have Protestants escaped the same mistake, from the same source, as we learn, among other cases, from the history of that excellent community of