

*The Prayer-Book, a Safeguard against Religious
Excitement*, by Frederick William Faber. (1838).

THE
PRAYER-BOOK,
A
SAFEGUARD AGAINST RELIGIOUS
EXCITEMENT.

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In returning and rest shall ye be
saved; in quietness and confidence
shall be your strength.— ISAIAH. xxx.
15.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR J. G. F. & J. RIVINGTON,
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD,
AT WATERLOO PLACE, PALL MALL.
1838.
Price Threepence.

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THE Jews of old time, it mattered not how far distant they might be, though seas and mountains were between themselves and their native land, never prayed without turning their faces towards Jerusalem, the holy city of the great King. It was a centre of unity, in which the tribes met yearly at their solemn festivals, and to which their affections went up always, where-ever in the wide world their lot was thrown. So we, in like manner, are furnished with a similar point of unity in our Baptism. There was the beginning of our spiritual life, there was the source and fountain of all our spiritual dignities and titles. All we are and all we have of what is good and pure and heavenly within us, we have from the Spirit who brooded over the face of those mighty waters. What is called religious experience is made up of endless changes and fluctuations. Occasional fervors of piety, succeeded by seasons of coldness and of deadness; high and holy vows made, and kept awhile, and broken, and renewed again; victory and defeat, defeat and victory, sinning and repenting, repenting and sinning: this, alas! is but too true a description of the religious state of good men among ourselves. Of course so long as the taint of original sin remains even in them that are regenerate, it is not possible to arrive at a state of perfection in this world. There must be falls, there must be infirmities, clinging about us, and keeping us back in our way to Heaven. Man's best estate has still the spot of sin upon it, and his strength is after all in the confession of his weakness. But still, granting most fully all which Holy Scripture and our own consciences bid us grant, we cannot acquiesce in that state of changing and backsliding and

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continual beginning again, which many are glad to look upon as a sad but necessary evil. When we seriously and thoughtfully read the Holy Scriptures, and are content modestly to receive the teaching therein contained, in its plain, natural, grammatical sense, we cannot but acknowledge that a height of Christian attainment is there put before us as possible, which is far beyond the present standard of holiness. *Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.* These are plain words, yet it is difficult to see what meaning we are to attach to them in these most worldly times, without explaining them away, so as not to condemn ourselves.

And, when we read the records of the early Church, we find truly that the holiness of those primitive Saints was something very different from ours. We have degenerated from them in all things. Seven times a day, after the example of holy David, were they at their prayers: we think it much to attend Church regularly twice a week. The Word of God was seldom out of their hands; many of them knew the whole of it by heart: alas! how many are there among us who allow a day to pass away without opening that blessed Book! In self-denial, they could say with St. Paul, that they were in watchings and in fastings often, and, with the bold Apostle, could protest that they died daily, and that they kept under their bodies and brought them into subjection. We, on the contrary, gather our comforts, our luxuries, and elegances about us, dwell in the midst of softness and self-indulgence, and would fain flatter ourselves all the while that we are treading in the steps of the Son of God, Who for our sakes, yet not surely that we should wax wanton in our liberty, led a life of toil and suffering, poverty and contempt, mortification and austerity. Such too, in their measure like their Master, were the bright lights of primitive antiquity. The time would fail me to tell of Martyrs and Confessors, Bishops and Doctors, who,

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through the might of early piety and in the freshness of early faith, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, received in torture the bright red crown of Martyrdom, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. There was a healthy vigour and hardiness, a zeal and a roughness, chaste, severe, and uncompromising, that contrasts strangely with the feeble and effeminate piety of modern times.

If it is easy for the reader of church history to institute this comparison, it is as easy to discover the causes of the difference. They are mainly three. *First, the less frequent solemnization of the Holy Eucharist.* The early Christians received that great Sacrament once every Sunday at least. We think it much to receive it once a month. Man did eat angels' food. It was their daily nourishment. How strong then must they have been who went forth to battle sustained by the Body of their Lord and Saviour, the everlasting Son of God; and with what cheerfulness and alacrity did they brace themselves up to meet danger, whose hearts were gladdened continually with the spiritual Wine of His most precious Blood! The grace they received had not time to wear out in its contact with the world before it was refreshed again. They lived always in the same earnest and affectionate piety which we perchance may feel for the first few days after we have received that blessed Sacrament, when all the world seems dull and uninviting, and our hearts are burning within us because of the felt presence of the Son of God.

The *second* cause of the decay of piety is our *forgetfulness of Holy Baptism.* In ancient times men had it continually in their thoughts. They could scarcely speak or write on any religious subject without the discourse turning on Baptism at last. Children were educated simply as baptized children. They were taught that things were right or wrong in proportion as they affected the Baptismal vow. Sins were considered more or less heinous as they were

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supposed to stain Baptismal purity. Baptism was to them all in all; because it was there they found the Cross of Christ set up. It was in the Font that the unspeakable riches of Christ were poured out most freely, most mightily, most abundantly. They thought no words too great, no names too magnificent to express its transcendent dignity. They called it “the new birth, the regeneration, the chariot carrying us to God, the great circumcision, the key of the kingdom, the robe of light, the sacrament of eternal salvation:” and an old Bishop of the African Church expressly says that in Baptism “the faith and profession of the believers meets with the ever-blessed Trinity, and is recorded in the register of Angels, where heavenly and spiritual seeds are mingled; that from so holy a spring may be produced a new nature of the regeneration, that, while the Trinity meets with the faith of the baptised, he that was born to the world may be born spiritually to God. So God is made a father to the man, and the holy Church a Mother.” Now how like all this is to the way in which St. Paul talks of Baptism; his frequent use of the words, *washed, sprinkled, sealed, laver of regeneration*, and the like; and St. Peter’s express words that by Baptism are we saved, answering to that of St. Paul, *buried with Christ in Baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God*. And how unlike all this is to the few cold, thankless, and occasional allusions we make to our own new birth, and the heavenly privileges in which we were then and there arrayed!

A third reason of our degeneracy is to be found in the *absence of Church discipline*, to punish with spiritual censures and public penitences gross and notorious immorality. At the Reformation men’s minds were in a constant tumult and distraction, and, before the Discipline of the Church was finally settled in convocation, King Edward died, and the fierce and bloody triumph of Popery under Queen Mary threw all things “back into confusion. Therefore it is that once a year, on Ash Wednesday, when

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the Communion is read, the Church reminds us of the godly Discipline there was in the Primitive Church, and utters a mournful complaint that the said Discipline is not restored again, "which is much to be wished." The world has proved too strong for her, and that is still kept back which can alone restore us to the high and loyal-hearted piety of our Christian ancestors. It will be enough on this head to leave the subject with the eloquent and weighty judgment of the venerable Hooker. "No doubt," says he, "but penitency is a prayer, a thing acceptable unto God, be it in public or in secret. Howbeit as in the one, if men were wholly left to their own voluntary meditations in their closets, and not drawn by laws and orders unto the open assemblies of the Church, that there they may join with others in prayer, it may be soon conjectured what Christian devotion that way would come unto in a short time. Even so in the other we are by sufficient experience taught how little it booteth to tell men of washing away their sins with tears of repentance, and so to leave them altogether to themselves. O Lord, what heaps of grievous transgressions have we committed, the best and perfectest, the most righteous amongst us all, and yet clean pass them over unsorrowed for and unrepented of, only because the Church hath forgotten utterly to bestow her wonted times of Discipline, wherein the public example of all was unto every particular person a most effectual means to put them often in mind, and even in a manner to draw them to that which we now altogether and utterly forget, as if penitency was no part of a Christian man's duty."

Thus it is that what is in the present day called the religious world is very different from the Church of old time. The spiritual condition of its members is different, and consequently the spiritual remedies to be applied must be different also. Persons have been brought up without any reference to their Baptism; and very many have come to years of discretion without any thing like an abiding sense

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of religion. Such they are to outward appearance. But a new life is yet hid within them. The seed may from negligent education or other untoward circumstances have lain dormant, as the spring-time of the natural year is often unseasonably late. It is not dead, but sleepeth. The power of God is still folded up within it, to be put forth at His good pleasure. Hence it is we sometimes see young children who on their death-beds evince a thoughtful-ness, a spiritual growth, and an intelligent apprehension of things heavenly, almost beyond belief. It is because the young plant is forced, as it were, by the circumstances among which it is placed. It does not wait the slow and tardy process of ordinary blossoming; but springs all at once to its full bloom. The light of heaven is shed for a short while about it, and it is forthwith transplanted to a quieter and purer home than this. And it is the same with older persons. That which is now called *conversion* is but the wakening of Baptismal life, more or less sudden as the case may be. Some sharp sickness or bereavement, some narrow escape, some unexpected good fortune, or other special Providence shocks a man into a consciousness of his Baptismal powers. He is all at once aroused from the sleep of sin. The scales fall from the eyes, and he finds that he has unconsciously been living in a world of spirit and of spiritual things, while he thought of nothing but the base and empty pleasures of sense.

Now here is the danger. The zeal of new converts is proverbial. They are but children in religion; yet unfortunately men in powers and passions and affections. The feelings are very much heated and excited, and the judgment shaken for a while, as well it may be, both by a view of the horrible dangers it has escaped, and the unspeakable mercies that are open to it. Men in this state of mind are not content to be quiet. Quietness in religion is only the fruit of a mature faith. The Jordan may *seem* but small and insignificant in comparison with the rivers they

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themselves would choose. They cannot bring themselves to believe in its healing powers; and to wash therein seems too poor a return for the exuberant warmth of their zeal. They forget God has chosen that little stream: and that His choice is all we have to do with; and so they hurry self-willed to the mightier, but ungifted, rivers of Damascus. Men are wayward in every thing. They will have their own way even in religion. This is a fertile source of Dissent. The Church gives no room for singularity. She is the net of which our Lord spake, full of fishes both bad and good: and the day of separation is not come yet. Whatever she does she does as every body else does it, as her Master did while he was on earth, when he sat at meat with publicans and sinners. The Saints of God are hid within her bosom scarcely seen by the world except in the faint shinings of their good works, which are so many reflections of the glory of the Lord. She bids new converts come to Church, and to Sacraments, and to pray, and to read the Holy Scriptures; things which many worldly men do from habit, from hypocrisy, from early association, from glimmerings of good feeling. She bids them come out from the world, and be separate; but it must be in their own hearts and within her bosom. There must be no bustle, no changing about, no ostentation, no singularity, no excitement; all of which are worldly and belong to worldly things.

Now if a person leaves the Church professing religious grounds, such as that it is not strict enough or pure enough for him, and that he is called upon to do some great thing for the Lord, he at once becomes a marked character. He has committed himself to that of which he does not in the least understand the importance. He has entered upon a track, which will lead him he knows not where. However, at the first, he is a person of consideration and importance in the party to which he attaches himself, which no individual ever is in the Church. And so he separates from the Body of Christ, which St. Paul tells us is the Church,

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the one Catholic and Apostolic Church. Alas! all this is a miserable and desperate delusion, to say no worse of it. Many and many a man has so left the Church, and, as the excitement of novelty went down, got tired of his new friends, and thus has gone from sect to sect, finding no rest for the sole of his foot; like a poor dove that flies farther and farther from home, and then, when she would fain return, has not strength of wing to carry her, but sinks to earth in a waste and dreary place. And so he goes on till at length he has settled down into the cold and repulsive creed which denies the Divinity of the Son of Man; and even that too, naked, barren, and comfortless as it is, even that fails him at last, it has failed, and must fail all its followers, in the chill and desolate and hopeless hour of death.

Men soon find that the excitement of their first feelings gradually subsides: and then they fancy their love is waxing cold. But this is not necessarily the case. Do we not find the same with our parents? We do not always feel our love to them so sensibly as to others; but is not our love to them stronger and deeper all the while? The thing is, that custom prevents our feeling it. So it is in religion: and if we once get safely through the dangerous excitement of our earliest penitent feelings, we shall go on calmly and religiously, treading a path of pleasantness and peace unutterable. Now it is the Prayer-Book, and that only, which is our safeguard against religious excitement. There is a calm fulness of devotional feeling breathing, like the low notes of music, through all its services, a high and elevated chastity, coupled with an affectionate reverence, which gives to its prayers a power, such as accompanies the language of inspiration. When a man is first awakened to a sense of religion, and the waters of Baptism begin to stir within him, he finds himself in some such state as this. He is surrounded by duties to do, evil things to be left undone. He has all his old habits to unlearn, and new ones to learn in their place. His soul is overwhelmed with a flood of

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thoughts and feelings, torn different ways with hopes and fears, and wishes and anxieties, distracted with perplexed and contradictory views of things. He does not know where to turn himself, or what to begin upon first. The Holy Bible itself only adds to his confusion. It is like a wilderness to him. He is at a loss where to find what is applicable to his own case. He is dazzled and lost in the number and the brightness of the glories which lie about him. A multitude of doctrines, of precepts, of characters demand his attention, and all of them at once. Now to save himself from settling into imperfect notions or contracted views of the truth as it is in Jesus, his only way is to fall in with the system of the Prayer Book, at whatever time of the year it may be that the Holy Spirit unlocks the fountains of his heart. What that system is, I propose now to show you. The Christian Year is regulated, as you well know, by the life of our most blessed Lord and Saviour. We are here in this world with our loins girded and our lamps burning, waiting for the bridegroom. The Church, therefore, on the four first Sundays of the ecclesiastical year, calls upon us to prepare for the joyous festival of our Saviour's Advent. Christmas Day, The Massacre of the Holy Innocents, the Circumcision of Christ, and His Epiphany, which is the birthday of the Gentile Church, follow in quick succession. On this last great event the Church in the fulness of her joy dwells for five or six Sundays, when she abruptly breaks off on Septuagesima Sunday, three Sundays before Lent, that we may not pass too quickly and too unpreparedly from a season of joy and festive thoughts to one of dimness and penitential tears. By this time we are sobered and subdued, and saddened by the recollection of our sins; and, as our Saviour passed away from the world by the leading of the Spirit, for forty days of fasting and temptation and spiritual conflict in the wilderness, so the Church; like the moon going behind a cloud, enters the solemn season of Lent. The five Sundays which intervene are still festivals;

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but the collects are of a more humble and pensive nature. As we approach Easter the gloom of Passion week gets thicker and deeper until Good Friday, the day of shame when our sins crucified the Lord of life, and which we yet call *Good* for the precious gift it gave us, redemption from everlasting slavery. Through Easter Eve we wait in silence while our Lord is laid in His Sepulchre of stone; till the Easter sun begins to rise, and the Sun of Righteousness rises with it with healing on His wings; and the Lord appears to us in the Holy Sacrament, as He did to Simon, when He first arose, and when He was made known at Emmaus in the breaking of bread. For three whole days this high Festival is prolonged, till on the Wednesday in Easter week we return to our worldly occupations. For five Sundays more the Church is with her risen Lord, till on Ascension Day she sees Him received up to glory. And, as she may not be with Him yet, but must remain on earth both a widow and a bride, she prays that we may in heart and mind thither ascend and with Him continually dwell. One Sunday more, and we arrive at the Feast of Pentecost, Whitsunday, and celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Ghost when the Church was endued with that power from on high, which shall not fail her until time shall be no more. This festival also for its greatness is prolonged three days, there being a service both for Monday and Tuesday in Whitsun week. Lastly, as in the Name of the Trinity we were first baptized and by that mysterious Name we must be saved, the Church calls upon us, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity. For, knowing our weakness and our want of faith, and our irreverent boldness in prying too curiously into things which Angels only desire to look into, she in her wisdom had prayed for us the Sunday and all the week before, that we might have a right judgment in all things. After this follow four or five and twenty Sundays, which,

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as they celebrate nothing, are simply called the Sundays after Trinity. These are times of stillness and retirement. The first half of the year the Church by mighty and spirit-stirring festivals kept raising our love to Christ to its very height. Now she bids us act out in common life those feelings we have gained. She bids us modestly and meekly live holy lives as the only worthy fruits of those high and noble affections. Thus the shining pathway of her year keeps mounting higher and higher till it touches the adorable Trinity, when it again sinks silently down in awe till Advent comes round once more.

Beside this, she has sprinkled lesser festivals all over the year, like fragrant flowers to refresh us, in which she celebrates the Blessed Virgin, the Baptist, and the Holy Apostles and Evangelists. One she has set apart in honour of St. Michael and all Angels, that we may duly reverence those bright guardians who are ministering spirits to the heirs of salvation: and another to the commemoration of All Saints, the multitude that no man can number, that we may not forget the Dead, knit together with us in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical Body of Christ our Lord. In the course of this holy year, the Psalms are read through twelve times, in her daily services, the Old Testament once through with the Apocrypha, and the New Testament three times except the Revelations. Thus in a calm and clear order the life of our blessed Saviour and all He did for us, the doctrines of our most Holy Faith, and the examples of the most eminent Saints, are brought before us one after the other without any confusion; and with services so wonderfully adapted as to stir the heart of the coldest, and win the admiration of the worldly man, even where they cannot interest his affections.

Here then is our remedy, here our safeguard against religious excitement—in the Prayer-book. It is handed down to us by the wisdom and the piety of ancient days, and consecrated by the memory of the Dead, whom it has

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guided so faithfully through the tossing world to their eternal rest. Its daily psalms and lessons, and its simple collects, form a manual of private or family devotion, where the public service is unhappily disused, such as the most affectionate fervours of a sober-minded piety could desire. Thus the Church, like a wise Mother, keeps feeding us with the bread of life with an unsparing hand: and as the Apostles gave the bread to the people, which the Master first had blessed, so does she from Him rightly divide the word of truth to those that seek it: and yet, when all are satisfied, her treasure is not less. Each day and week, each season of the year is furnished with its own peculiar subject for religious meditation. We know that what may be done at any time is for the most part left undone altogether. Were we left to ourselves, there would be doubtless many times when we should not meditate on holy things, simply because no thought was ready to our hands; and many subjects would probably be entirely omitted, or not dwelt upon sufficiently. But now we have always matter for pious reflection. Some one heavenly thought is given us by the Church to carry in our hearts day by day into the throng of toil and business; and there it dwells ready at any time to come to our aid against temptation, to put impure and wandering thoughts to flight, to fill up idle minutes which Satan else would occupy, and to be as it were a sanctifying leaven to all our worldly schemes and cares. But there is another blessing yet which comes to us by the use of the Prayer-book. There are in the land many vast and reverend Cathedrals, many Churches and Chapels, where the voice of the Church is still lifted up in her daily Services. There are many Christian families, whose day begins and ends with the Prayer-book in their domestic worship; and many private Christians also who use its prayers to the joy and consolation of their hearts. Thus the poor in their lonely cottages, scattered through the land, may turn their eyes to the village Church as to their little Jerusalem where their

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fathers worshipped; and, as they use the Church prayers, may feel that many loyal hearts are that day, and every day, joining with them in the same devotions. The smoke of the incense goes up from a hundred altars, but it rises to the throne of grace as one people's one offering, their daily sacrifice of prayer and praise, the smell of a sweet savour to the Lord, because of which, *while the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease*. Thus the Prayer-book realizes in a way the glorious Communion of Saints. The humblest member of the Church need not, cannot feel solitary in his religious course. His path may be rugged, but it cannot be dreary. We all of us have surely had seasons of trial and weariness when our spirits would have fainted within us, had we not known of a certainty how many brothers there were treading the same path, using the same prayers, and thinking the same holy thoughts as ourselves.

We have at best but little spiritual strength: and excitement wastes in occasional and vehement outbreaks that healthy vigour which the duty of unceasing vigilance calls for every day. Satan it may be retires for a season, when the fit of elevation is upon us, well knowing that the weary spirit must soon sink down into a helpless lassitude, a prey to his wily and destructive arts; and that then the time for his attack is come. We cannot always live in that unnatural state. The fever must be followed by exhaustion sooner or later, as our temperament may be. The very largeness of a penitent's heart, the very generosity of his zeal is oftentimes a snare to him. And he cannot be too frequently reminded that the most ordinary duties are hard enough for him to perform at first.

The daily round, the common task
Will give us all we ought to ask,
Room to deny ourselves, a road
To bring us daily nearer God.

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If we rise every morning with a firm resolve to make some self-denial that day, to do something, however trifling, for the honour and service of God, we need not go out of our way to find it. *My son, the Lord will provide a ram for a burnt offering.* Some chance victim or other will be caught in the thicket by our own wayside, that will serve for a reasonable and acceptable sacrifice. In worldly pleasures we all know how transient and unsatisfying excitement is, how jaded and spiritless it leaves the mind afterwards, and how it untunes us for duty or for serious things. So it is in Religion. It is easy for persons of quick temperament to keep up a false, though it must be an intermittent, heat by some means or other through life. It is *possible* to feed the dying lamp with the same unhallowed fire. But, oh! how awful the thought that a spirit should leave this world, not calm and reverent and self-collected, but passing rudely into the presence of Almighty God, sustained by the false and feverish delusion of overwrought and unsound feelings. Let us rather go on leaning on the arm of the Church all the year through; and, by God's blessing, we may die as calmly as we have lived, at the foot of the Cross; and our souls may pass with a gentle shock, as He sees best for us, to that happy and tranquil Paradise, where, with Patriarchs, Prophets and Apostles, the spirits of just men abide, waiting for the Lord; whose portion is, where God grant ours may be also, among glorious hopes and visions and mysterious joys.

The Collect for Easter Even.

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of Thy blessed Son our Saviour JESUS CHRIST; so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections, we may be buried with Him; and that through the grave and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection, for His merits Who died and was buried, and rose again for us, Thy

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Son JESUS CHRIST our Lord. *Amen.*