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**William Ellery Channing**  
**Excerpts from *Likeness to God* (1838)**

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*This remarkable sermon by the prominent Boston Unitarian William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) can be approached in several ways: (1) as an example of the Unitarian reaction against Calvinist pessimism (e.g., the doctrine of mankind's 'utter depravity'); (2) as an influence on the emerging New England Transcendentalist movement; or (3) as a precursor to the developing interest in theosis (human divinization) in 20th and 21st century Christianity. The title, "likeness to God" is Platonic. (See e.g.; "we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise." [Theaetetus 176a-b]; by "escape from earth", of course, what Plato means is philosophia, the main theme of the entire Platonic corpus.) Channing was familiar both with Plato and the Cambridge Platonists. Historical considerations aside, the work stands on its own merits as an excellent sermon, and supports the view that Channing is an important American Christian theologian.*

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From William Ellery Channing, *Likeness to God*

EPHESIANS 5:11 *Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.*

[1] The text calls us to follow or imitate God, to seek accordance with or likeness to him; and to do this not fearfully and faintly, but with the spirit and hope of beloved children. The doctrine which I propose to illustrate is derived immediately from these words, and is incorporated with the whole New Testament. I affirm, and would maintain, that true religion consists in proposing, as our great end, a growing likeness to the Supreme Being. Its noblest influence consists in making us more and more partakers of the Divinity. For this it is to be preached. Religious instruction should aim chiefly to turn men's aspirations and efforts to that perfection of the soul which constitutes it a bright image of God. Such is the topic now to be discussed.

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[2] I begin with observing, what all indeed will understand, that the likeness to God, of which I propose to speak, belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. In proportion as these lie dormant, it is obscured. In proportion as they are perverted and overpowered by the appetites and passions, it is blotted out. In truth, moral evil, if unresisted and habitual, may so blight and lay waste these capacities, that the image of God in man may seem to be wholly destroyed.

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[3] It is only in proportion to this likeness that we can enjoy either God or the universe.... That the pure in heart can alone see and commune with the pure Divinity, was the sublime instruction of ancient sages as well as of inspired prophets. It is indeed the lesson of daily experience.

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[4] God becomes a real being to us in proportion as his own nature is unfolded within us. To a man who is growing in the likeness of God, faith begins even here to change into vision. He carries within himself a proof of a Deity, which can only be understood by experience.

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[5] It is plain, too, that likeness to God is the true and only preparation for the enjoyment of the universe. In proportion as we approach and resemble the mind of God, we are brought into harmony with the creation; for in that proportion we possess the principles from which the universe sprung; we carry within ourselves the perfections of which its beauty, magnificence, order, benevolent adaptations, and boundless purposes are the results and manifestations. God unfolds himself in his works to a kindred mind. It is possible that the brevity of these hints may expose to the charge of mysticism what seems to me the calmest and clearest truth. I think, however, that every reflecting man will feel that likeness to God must be a principle of sympathy or accordance with his creation: for the creation is a birth and shining forth of the Divine Mind, a work through which his spirit breathes. In proportion as we receive this spirit we possess within ourselves the explanation of what we see. We discern more and more of God in every thing, from the frail flower to the everlasting stars. Even in evil, that dark cloud which hangs over the creation, we discern rays of light and hope, and gradually come to see, in suffering and temptation, proofs and instruments of the sublimest purposes of wisdom and love.

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[6] I would teach that likeness to God is a good so unutterably surpassing all other good, that whoever admits it as attainable must acknowledge it to be the chief aim of life.

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[7] Men, as by a natural inspiration, have agreed to speak of conscience as the voice of God, as the Divinity within us.

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[8] To me it seems that the soul, in all its higher actions, in original thought, in the creations of genius, in the soarings of imagination, in its love of beauty and grandeur, in its aspirations after a pure and unknown joy, and especially in disinterestedness, in the spirit of self-sacrifice, and in enlightened devotion, has a character of infinity.

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[9] There is sometimes a lofty strength in moral principle which all the power of the outward universe cannot overcome..... There is, too, a piety which swells into a transport too vast for utterance, and into an immeasurable joy. I am speaking, indeed, of what is uncommon, but still of realities.

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[10] The conviction of this near and ennobling relation of God to the soul, and of his great purposes towards it, belongs to the very essence of true religion; and true religion manifests itself chiefly and most conspicuously in desires, hopes, and efforts, corresponding to this truth. It desires and seeks supremely the assimilation of the mind to God, or the perpetual unfolding and enlargement of those powers and virtues by which it is constituted his glorious image. The mind, in proportion as it is enlightened and penetrated by true religion, thirsts and labors for a godlike elevation.

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[11] True religion is known by these high aspirations, hopes, and efforts. And this is the religion which most truly honors God. To honor him is not to tremble before him as an unapproachable sovereign, not to

utter barren praise which leaves us as it found us. It is to become what we praise. It is to approach God as an inexhaustible fountain of light, power, and purity. It is to feel the quickening and transforming energy of his perfections. It is to thirst for the growth and invigoration of the divine principle within us. It is to seek the very spirit of God. It is to trust in, to bless, to thank him for that rich grace, mercy, love, which was revealed and proffered by Jesus Christ, and which proposes as its great end the perfection of the human soul.

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[12] God calls you, both by nature and revelation, to a fellowship in his philanthropy: that he has placed you in social relations for the very end of rendering you ministers and representatives of his benevolence; that he even summons you to espouse and to advance the sublimest purpose of his goodness, the redemption of the human race, by extending the knowledge and power of Christian truth. It is through such views that religion raises up the soul, and binds man by ennobling bonds to his Maker.

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[13] To complete my views of this topic, I beg to add an important caution. I have said that the great work of religion is to conform ourselves to God, or to unfold the divine likeness within us. Let none infer from this language that I place religion in unnatural effort, in straining after excitements which do not belong to the present state, or in any thing separate from the clear and simple duties of life. I exhort you to no extravagance. I reverence human nature too much to do it violence. I see too much divinity in its ordinary operations to urge on it a forced and vehement virtue. To grow in the likeness of God we need not cease to be men. This likeness does not consist in extraordinary or miraculous gifts, in supernatural additions to the soul, or in any thing foreign to our original constitution; but in our essential faculties, unfolded by vigorous and conscientious exertion in the ordinary circumstances assigned by God.

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[14] To resemble our Creator we need not fly from society, and entrance ourselves in lonely contemplation and prayer. Such processes might give a feverish strength to one class of emotions, but would result in disproportion, distortion, and sickness of mind. Our proper work is to approach God by the free and natural unfolding of our highest powers, — of understanding, conscience, love, and the moral will.

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[15] We approach our Creator by every right exertion of the powers He gives us. Whenever we invigorate the understanding by honestly and resolutely seeking truth, and by withstanding whatever might warp the judgment; whenever we invigorate the conscience by following it in opposition to the passions; whenever we receive a blessing gratefully, bear a trial patiently, or encounter peril or scorn with moral courage; whenever we perform a disinterested deed; whenever we lift up the heart in true adoration to God; whenever we war against a habit or desire which is strengthening itself against our higher principles; whenever we think, speak, or act, with moral energy and resolute devotion to duty, be the occasion ever so humble, obscure, familiar; — then the divinity is growing within us, and we are ascending towards our Author. True religion thus blends itself with common life. We are thus to draw nigh to God with out forsaking men. We are thus, without parting with our human nature, to clothe ourselves with the divine.

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[16] I see the marks of God in the heavens and the earth, but how much more in a liberal intellect, in magnanimity, in unconquerable rectitude, in a philanthropy which forgives every wrong, and which never despairs of the cause of Christ and human virtue!

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[17] The divinity is stirring within the human breast, and demanding a culture and a liberty worthy of the child of God. Let religious teaching correspond to this advancement of the mind. Let it rise above the technical, obscure, and frigid theology which has come down to us from times of ignorance, superstition, and slavery. Let it penetrate the human soul, and reveal it to itself. No preaching, I believe, is so intelligible as that which is true to human nature, and helps men to read their own spirits.

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[18] Christ's greatness is manifested in the greatness of the nature which he was sent to redeem.

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[19] I conclude with saying, let the minister cherish a reverence for his own I nature.... Let him hold fast, as one of the great qualifications for his office, a faith in the greatness of the human soul...., Let him strive to awaken in men a consciousness of the heavenly treasure within them, a consciousness of possessing what is of more worth than the outward universe. Let hope give life to all his labors. Let him speak to men as to beings liberally gifted and made for God. Let him always look round on a congregation with the encouraging trust that he has hearers prepared to respond to the simple, unaffected utterance of great truths, and to the noblest workings of his own mind. Let him feel deeply for those in whom the divine nature is overwhelmed by the passions. Let him sympathize tenderly with those in whom it begins to struggle, to mourn for sin, to thirst for a new life. Let him guide and animate to higher and diviner virtue those in whom it has gained strength. Let him strive to infuse courage, enterprise, devout trust, and an inflexible will into men's labors for their own perfection. In one word, let him cherish an unfaltering and growing faith in God as the Father and quickener of the human mind, and in Christ as its triumphant and immortal friend.

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[20] Such a minister will be a benefactor beyond all praise to the human soul. I believe, and know, that on those who will admit his influence he will work deeply, powerfully, gloriously. His function is the sublimest under heaven; and his reward will be a growing power of spreading truth, virtue, moral strength, love, and happiness, without limit and without end.

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SOURCE: William Ellery Channing, 'Likeness to God. Discourse at the Ordination of Rev. F. A. Farley, Providence, Rhode Island, 1828.' In: *The Complete Works of W. E. Channing, D. D., Vol. 4*, London: George Routledge, 1870 (pp. 230–239).

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