

## Disinterestedness: The Man Whose Funeral Was Cancelled Twice

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Disinterestedness. This compelling word is not about what you might expect. We have all seen (and been) the disinterested student, expressionless, gazing into some unknown blank space outside the classroom, waiting out the final eternal moments of the professor's pedantic, sleep-inducing hum. That describes a use of the word, but not our use. What we wish to say with this word is immensely desirable; it was once employed to describe the *best* of conditions of the believer. The following intriguing story from the pen of Archibald Alexander, beloved 19<sup>th</sup> century Princeton professor, illustrates.

In the middle colonies, mid 1700's, there were no schools for the training of preachers as there were in the east. William Tennent, Sr., began what was soon called "the Log College" to address the need, and trained his own sons there—first, the famous Gilbert Tennent, then John, and finally William, Jr. After young William finished, he was preparing for his ordination examination when his studies began to affect his health. He became emaciated, "and at length was like a living skeleton." A young physician attended to him and became a warm friend. Little hope was left for him after some time and his spirits began to fail. He began to "entertain doubts about his final happiness."

"As he was conversing one morning with his brother in Latin on the state of his soul he fainted and died away. After the usual time he was laid out on a board...and the neighborhood was invited to attend his funeral on the next day. In the evening, his physician...returned from a ride in the country" and was deeply disturbed. Upon feeling some unusual warmth in a certain place, he "insisted that the people who had been invited to the funeral should be requested not to attend." Gilbert believed this to be absurd, "the eyes being sunk, the lips discolored and the whole body cold and still." The doctor prevailed and used every possible means to treat the patient, night and day.

The third day came and still there was no life. "The people were again invited, and assembled to attend the funeral. The doctor still objected, and at last confined his request to delay to one hour, then to half an hour, and finally to a quarter of an hour. He had discovered that the tongue was much swollen and threatened to crack," and "was endeavoring to soften it, by some emollient...with a feather, when the brother came in, about the expiration of the last period, and mistaking what the doctor was doing for attempting to feed him...in a spirited tone said, 'it is shameful to be feeding a lifeless corpse;' and insisted that the funeral should immediately proceed. At this most critical moment, the body, to the great alarm and astonishment of all present, opened its eyes, gave a dreadful groan and sunk again into apparent death. This put an end to all thought of burying him." In about an hour this happened again and he went back into the former state. "Mr. Tennent continued in so weak and low a state for six weeks, that great doubts were entertained of his final recovery."

About 12 months later, "his sister . . . was reading the Bible, when he took notice of it and asked her what she was reading. She answered that she was reading the Bible. He replied, 'What is the Bible? I know not what you mean.'" William, she discovered, had forgotten all details of his earlier life and therefore had to start learning English and Latin like a schoolboy. However, during that period, all of a sudden, he had a shock in his head and completely regained his senses and memory.

Alexander asked Tennent personally for any explanation he could give. Though Tennent almost never spoke of his experience because it was so precious, here were his words: "While I was conversing with my brother on the state of my soul, and the fears I had entertained for my future welfare, I found myself, in an instant, in another state of existence, under the direction of a superior being, who ordered me to follow him. I was accordingly wafted along, I know not how, till I beheld at a distance an ineffable glory, the impression of which on my mind it is impossible to communicate to mortal man. I immediately reflected on my happy change, and thought, —Well, blessed be God! I am safe at last, notwithstanding all my fears. I saw an innumerable host of happy beings surrounding the inexpressible glory, in acts of adoration and joyous worship; but I did not see any bodily shape or representation in the glorious appearance. I heard things unutterable...I then applied myself to my conductor, and requested leave to join the happy throng; on which he tapped me on the shoulder, and said, 'You must return to earth.' This seemed like a sword through my heart. In an instant, I recollect to have seen my brother standing before me, disputing with the doctor. The three days during which I had appeared lifeless seemed to me not more than ten or twenty minutes. The idea of returning to this world of sorrow and trouble gave me such a shock, that I fainted repeatedly."

Listen now to his expression of our subject, *disinterestedness*. In correspondence from another who had talked with Tennent he quoted him as saying, 'For three years [following recovery] the sense of divine things continued so great, and everything else appeared so completely vain, when compared to heaven, that *could I have had the whole world for stooping down for it, I believe I should not have thought of doing it.*

This long story, whether you believe it to be credible or not, illustrates in an exaggerated sense what *disinterestedness* is about. It is the product of an absorption of mind so deep that the world and normal temptations have no appeal. Francis Schaeffer wrote that believers should live their lives as if they had died and gone to heaven and then returned again. Just how would you respond to your normal temptations after having seen heaven?

*"Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth . . . therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed . . ."* (Col. 3:2,5)

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