

1 "Unreal Words"

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3 St. John Henry Newman

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5  
6 "Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far  
7 off." Isaiah xxxiii. 17.

8 THE Prophet tells us, that under the Gospel covenant God's servants will have the  
9 privilege of seeing those heavenly sights which were but shadowed out in the Law.  
10 Before Christ came was the time of shadows; but when He came, He brought truth as  
11 well as grace; and as He who is the Truth has come to us, so does He in return require  
12 that we should be true and sincere in our dealings with Him. To be true and sincere is  
13 really to see with our minds those great wonders which He has wrought in order that we  
14 might see them. When God opened the eyes of the ass on which Balaam rode, she saw  
15 the Angel and acted upon the sight. When He opened the eyes of the young man,  
16 Elisha's servant, he too saw the chariots and horses of fire, and took comfort. And in like  
17 manner, Christians are now under the protection of a Divine Presence, and that more  
18 wonderful than any which was vouchsafed of old time. God revealed Himself visibly to  
19 Jacob, to Job, to Moses, to Joshua, and to Isaiah; to us He reveals Himself not visibly,  
20 but more wonderfully and truly; not without the cooperation of our own will, but upon our  
21 faith, and for that very reason more truly; for faith is the special means of gaining  
22 spiritual blessings. Hence St. Paul prays for the Ephesians "that Christ may dwell in  
23 their hearts by faith," and that "the eyes of their understanding may be enlightened."  
24 And St. John declares that "the Son of God hath given us an understanding that we may  
25 know Him that is true: and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ."  
26 [Ephes. iii. 17; i. 18. 1 John v. 20.]

27 We are no longer then in the region of shadows: we have the true Saviour set before us,  
28 the true reward, and the true means of spiritual renewal. We know the true state of the  
29 soul by nature and by grace, the evil of sin, the consequences of sinning, the way of  
30 pleasing God, and the motives to act upon. God has revealed Himself clearly to us; He  
31 has "destroyed the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread  
32 over all nations." "The darkness is past, and the True Light now shineth." [Isa. xxv. 7. 1  
33 John ii. 8.] And therefore, I say, He calls upon us in turn to "walk in the light as He is in  
34 the light." The Pharisees might have this excuse in their hypocrisy, that the plain truth  
35 had not been revealed to them; we have not even this poor reason for insincerity. We  
36 have no opportunity of mistaking one thing for another: the promise is expressly made  
37 to us that "our teachers shall not be removed into a corner any more, but our eyes shall  
38 see our teachers;" that "the eyes of them that see shall not be dim;" that every thing  
39 shall be called by its right name; that "the vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor  
40 the churl said to be bountiful;" [Isa. xxx. 20; xxxii. 3, 5.] in a word, as the text speaks,  
41 that "our eyes shall see the king in His beauty; we shall behold the land that is very far  
42 off." Our professions, our creeds, our prayers, our dealings, our conversation, our  
43 arguments, our teaching must henceforth be sincere, or, to use an expressive word,  
44 must be *real*. What St. Paul says of himself and his fellow-laborers, that they were true

45 because Christ is true, applies to all Christians: "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of  
46 our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the  
47 grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-  
48 ward, ... The things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me  
49 there should be yea yea, and nay nay? But as God is true, our word toward you was not  
50 yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, ... was not yea and nay, but in Him was  
51 yea. For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of  
52 God by us." [2 Cor. i. 12-20.]

53 And yet it need scarcely be said, nothing is so rare as honesty and singleness of mind;  
54 so much so, that a person who is really honest, is already perfect. Insincerity was an  
55 evil which sprang up within the Church from the first; Ananias and Simon were not open  
56 opposers of the Apostles, but false brethren. And, as foreseeing what was to be, our  
57 Saviour is remarkable in His ministry for nothing more than the earnestness of the  
58 dissuasives which He addressed to those who came to Him, against taking up religion  
59 lightly, or making promises which they were likely to break.

60 Thus He, "the True Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," "the  
61 Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God," [John i. 9.  
62 Rev. iii. 14.] said to the young Ruler, who lightly called Him "Good Master," "Why callest  
63 thou Me good?" as bidding him weigh his words; and then abruptly told him, "One thing  
64 thou lackest." When a certain man professed that he would follow Him whithersoever  
65 He went, He did not respond to him, but said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of  
66 the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." When St. Peter  
67 said with all his heart in the name of himself and brethren, "To whom shall we go? Thou  
68 hast the words of eternal life," He answered pointedly, "Have not I chosen you twelve,  
69 and one of you is a devil?" as if He said, "Answer for thyself." When the two Apostles  
70 professed their desire to cast their lot with Him, He asked whether they could "drink of  
71 His cup, and be baptized with His baptism." And when "there went great multitudes with  
72 Him," He turned and said, that unless a man hated relations, friends, and self, he could  
73 not be His disciple. And then he proceeded to warn all men to "count the cost" ere they  
74 followed Him. Such is the merciful severity with which He repels us that He may gain us  
75 more truly. And what He thinks of those who, after coming to Him, relapse into a hollow  
76 and hypocritical profession, we learn from His language towards the Laodiceans: "I  
77 know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then,  
78 because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will cast thee out of My mouth."  
79 [Mark x. 17-21. Matt. viii. 20. John vi. 68-70. Matt. xx. 22. Luke xiv. 25-28. Rev. iii. 15,  
80 16.]

81 We have a striking instance of the same conduct on the part of that ancient Saint who  
82 prefigured our Lord in name and office, Joshua, the captain of the chosen people in  
83 entering Canaan. When they had at length taken possession of that land which Moses  
84 and their fathers had seen "very far off," they said to him, "God forbid that we should  
85 forsake the Lord, and serve other gods. We will ... serve the Lord, for He is our God."  
86 He made answer, "Ye cannot serve the Lord; for He is a holy God; He is a jealous God;  
87 He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins." [Josh. xxiv. 16-19.] Not as if he

88 would hinder them from obeying, but to sober them in professing. How does his answer  
89 remind us of St Paul's still more awful words, about the impossibility of renewal after  
90 utterly falling away!

91 And what is said of profession of *discipleship* applies undoubtedly in its degree  
92 to *all* profession. To make professions is to play with edged tools, unless we attend to  
93 what we are saying. Words have a meaning, whether we mean that meaning or not; and  
94 they are imputed to us in their real meaning, when our not meaning it is our own fault.  
95 He who takes God's Name in vain, is not counted guiltless because he means nothing  
96 by it,—he cannot frame a language for himself; and they who make professions, of  
97 whatever kind, are heard in the sense of those professions, and are not excused  
98 because they themselves attach no sense to them. "By thy words thou shalt be justified,  
99 and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." [Matt. xii. 37.]

100 Now this consideration needs especially to be pressed upon Christians at this day; for  
101 this is especially a day of professions. You will answer in my own words, that all ages  
102 have been ages of profession. So they have been, in one way or other, but this day in  
103 its own especial sense;—because this is especially a day of individual profession. This  
104 is a day in which there is (rightly or wrongly) so much of private judgment, so much of  
105 separation and difference, so much of preaching and teaching, so much of authorship,  
106 that it involves individual profession, responsibility, and recompense in a way peculiarly  
107 its own. It will not then be out of place if, in connexion with the text, we consider some of  
108 the many ways in which persons, whether in this age or in another, make unreal  
109 professions, or seeing see not, and hearing hear not, and speak without mastering, or  
110 trying to master, their words. This I will attempt to do at some length, and in matters of  
111 detail, which are not the less important because they are minute.

112 Of course it is very common in all matters, not only in religion, to speak in an unreal  
113 way; viz., when we speak on a subject with which our minds are not familiar. If you were  
114 to hear a person who knew nothing about military matters, giving directions how soldiers  
115 on service should conduct themselves, or how their food and lodging, or their marching,  
116 was to be duly arranged, you would be sure that his mistakes would be such as to  
117 excite the ridicule and contempt of men experienced in warfare. If a foreigner were to  
118 come to one of our cities, and without hesitation offer plans for the supply of our  
119 markets, or the management of our police, it is so certain that he would expose himself,  
120 that the very attempt would argue a great want of good sense and modesty. We should  
121 feel that he did not understand us, and that when he spoke about us, he would be using  
122 words without meaning. If a dim-sighted man were to attempt to decide questions of  
123 proportion and colour, or a man without ear to judge of musical compositions, we should  
124 feel that he spoke on and from general principles, on fancy, or by deduction and  
125 argument, not from a real apprehension of the matters which he discussed. His remarks  
126 would be theoretical and unreal.

127 This unsubstantial way of speaking is instanced in the case of persons who fall into any  
128 new company among strange faces and amid novel occurrences. They sometimes form  
129 amiable judgments of men and things, sometimes the reverse,—but whatever their

130 judgments be, they are to those who know the men and the things strangely unreal and  
131 distorted. They feel reverence where they should not; they discern slights where none  
132 were intended; they discover meaning in events which have none; they fancy motives;  
133 they misinterpret manner; they mistake character; and they form generalizations and  
134 combinations which exist only in their own minds.

135 Again, persons who have not attended to the subject of morals, or to politics, or to  
136 matters ecclesiastical, or to theology, do not know the relative value of questions which  
137 they meet with in these departments of knowledge. They do not understand the  
138 difference between one point and another. The one and the other are the same to them.  
139 They look at them as infants gaze at the objects which meet their eyes, in a vague  
140 unapprehensive way, as if not knowing whether a thing is a hundred miles off or close at  
141 hand, whether great or small, hard or soft. They have no means of judging, no standard  
142 to measure by,—and they give judgment at random, saying yea or nay on very deep  
143 questions, according as their fancy is struck at the moment, or as some clever or  
144 specious argument happens to come across them. Consequently they are inconsistent;  
145 say one thing one day, another the next;—and if they must act, act in the dark; or if they  
146 can help acting, do not act; or if they act freely, act from some other reason not avowed.  
147 All this is to be unreal.

148 Again, there cannot be a more apposite specimen of unreality than the way in which  
149 judgments are commonly formed upon important questions by the mass of the  
150 community. Opinions are continually given in the world on matters, about which those  
151 who offer them are as little qualified to judge as blind men about colours, and that  
152 because they have never exercised their minds upon the points in question. This is a  
153 day in which all men are obliged to have an opinion on all questions, political, social,  
154 and religious, because they have in some way or other an influence upon the decision;  
155 yet the multitude are for the most part absolutely without capacity to take their part in it.  
156 In saying this, I am far from meaning that this need be so,—I am far from denying that  
157 there is such a thing as plain good sense, or (what is better) religious sense, which will  
158 see its way through very intricate matters, or that this is in fact sometimes exerted in the  
159 community at large on certain great questions; but at the same time this practical sense  
160 is so far from existing as regards the vast mass of questions which in this day come  
161 before the public, that (as all persons who attempt to gain the influence of the people on  
162 their side know well) their opinions must be purchased by interesting their prejudices or  
163 fears in their favour;—not by presenting a question in its real and true substance, but by  
164 adroitly colouring it, or selecting out of it some particular point which may be  
165 exaggerated, and dressed up, and be made the means of working on popular feelings.  
166 And thus government and the art of government becomes, as much as popular religion,  
167 hollow and unsound.

168 And hence it is that the popular voice is so changeable. One man or measure is the idol  
169 of the people today, another tomorrow. They have never got beyond accepting shadows  
170 for things.

171 What is instanced in the mass is instanced also in various ways in individuals, and in  
172 points of detail. For instance, some men are set perhaps on being eloquent speakers.  
173 They use great words and imitate the sentences of others; and they fancy that those  
174 whom they imitate had as little meaning as themselves, or they perhaps contrive to think  
175 that they themselves have a meaning adequate to their words.

176 Another sort of unreality, or voluntary profession of what is above us, is instanced in the  
177 conduct of those who suddenly come into power or place. They affect a manner such as  
178 they think the office requires, but which is beyond them, and therefore unbecoming.  
179 They wish to act with dignity, and they cease to be themselves.

180 And so again, to take a different case, many men, when they come near persons in  
181 distress and wish to show sympathy, often condole in a very unreal way. I am not  
182 altogether laying this to their fault; for it is very difficult to know what to do, when on the  
183 one hand we cannot realize to ourselves the sorrow, yet withal wish to be kind to those  
184 who feel it. A tone of grief seems necessary, yet (if so be) cannot under our  
185 circumstances be genuine. Yet even here surely there is a true way, if we could find it,  
186 by which pretence may be avoided, and yet respect and consideration shown.

187 And in like manner as regards religious emotions. Persons are aware from the mere  
188 force of the doctrines of which the Gospel consists, that they ought to be variously  
189 affected, and deeply and intensely too, in consequence of them. The doctrines of  
190 original and actual sin, of Christ's Divinity and Atonement, and of Holy Baptism, are so  
191 vast, that no one can realize them without very complicated and profound feelings.  
192 Natural reason tells a man this, and that if he simply and genuinely believes the  
193 doctrines, he must have these feelings; and he professes to believe the doctrines  
194 absolutely, and therefore he professes the correspondent feelings. But in truth he  
195 perhaps does *not* really believe them absolutely, because such absolute belief is the  
196 work of long time, and therefore his profession of feeling outruns the real inward  
197 existence of feeling, or he becomes unreal. Let us never lose sight of two truths,—that  
198 we ought to have our hearts penetrated with the love of Christ and full of self-  
199 renunciation; but that if they be not, professing that they are does not make them so.

200 Again, to take a more serious instance of the same fault, some persons pray, not as  
201 sinners addressing their God, not as the Publican smiting on his breast, and saying,  
202 "God be merciful to me a sinner," but in such a way as they conceive to be  
203 becoming *under* circumstances of guilt, in a way becoming such a strait. They are self-  
204 conscious, and reflect on what they are about, and instead of actually approaching (as it  
205 were) the mercy-seat, they are filled with the thought that God is great, and man His  
206 creature, God on high and man on earth, and that they are engaged in a high and  
207 solemn service, and that they ought to rise up to its sublime and momentous character.

208 Another still more common form of the same fault, yet without any definite pretence or  
209 effort, is the mode in which people speak of the shortness and vanity of life, the  
210 certainty of death, and the joys of heaven. They have commonplaces in their mouths,  
211 which they bring forth upon occasions for the good of others, or to console them, or as a

212 proper and becoming mark of attention towards them. Thus they speak to clergymen in  
213 a professedly serious way, making remarks true and sound, and in themselves deep,  
214 yet unmeaning in their mouths; or they give advice to children or young men; or perhaps  
215 in low spirits or sickness they are led to speak in a religious strain as if it was  
216 spontaneous. Or when they fall into sin, they speak of man being frail, of the  
217 deceitfulness of the human heart, of God's mercy, and so on:—all these great words,  
218 heaven, hell, judgment, mercy, repentance, works, the world that now is, the world to  
219 come, being little more than "lifeless sounds, whether of pipe or harp," in their mouths  
220 and ears, as the "very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice and can play well  
221 on an instrument,"—as the proprieties of conversation, or the civilities of good breeding.

222 I am speaking of the conduct of the world at large, called Christian; but what has been  
223 said applies, and necessarily, to the case of a number of well-disposed or even religious  
224 men. I mean, that before men come to know the realities of human life, it is not  
225 wonderful that their view of religion should be unreal. Young people who have never  
226 known sorrow or anxiety, or the sacrifices which conscientiousness involves, want  
227 commonly that depth and seriousness of character, which sorrow only and anxiety and  
228 self-sacrifice can give. I do not notice this as a fault, but as a plain fact, which may often  
229 be seen, and which it is well to bear in mind. This is the legitimate use of this world, to  
230 make us seek for another. It does its part when it repels us and disgusts us and drives  
231 us elsewhere. Experience of it gives experience of that which is its antidote, in the case  
232 of religious minds; and we become real in our view of what is spiritual by the contact of  
233 things temporal and earthly. And much more are men unreal when they have some  
234 secret motive urging them a different way from religion, and when their professions  
235 therefore are forced into an unnatural course in order to subserve their secret motive.  
236 When men do not like the conclusions to which their principles lead, or the precepts  
237 which Scripture contains, they are not wanting in ingenuity to blunt their force. They can  
238 frame some theory, or dress up certain objections, to defend themselves withal; a  
239 theory, that is, or objections, which it is difficult to refute perhaps, but which any rightly-  
240 ordered mind, nay, any common bystander, perceives to be unnatural and insincere.

241 What has been here noticed of individuals, takes place even in the case of whole  
242 Churches, at times when love has waxed cold and faith failed. The whole system of the  
243 Church, its discipline and ritual, are all in their origin the spontaneous and exuberant  
244 fruit of the real principle of spiritual religion in the hearts of its members. The invisible  
245 Church has developed itself into the Church visible, and its outward rites and forms are  
246 nourished and animated by the living power which dwells within it. Thus every part of it  
247 is real, down to the minutest details. But when the seductions of the world and the lusts  
248 of the flesh have eaten out this divine inward life, what is the outward Church but a  
249 hollowness and a mockery, like the whited sepulchres of which our Lord speaks, a  
250 memorial of what was and is not? and though we trust that the Church is nowhere thus  
251 utterly deserted by the Spirit of truth, at east according to God's ordinary providence, yet  
252 may we not say that in proportion as it approaches to this state of deadness, the grace  
253 of its ordinances, though not forfeited, at least flows in but a scanty or uncertain stream?

254 And lastly, if this unreality may steal over the Church itself, which is in its very essence  
255 a practical institution, much more is it found in the philosophies and literature of men.  
256 Literature is almost in its essence unreal; for it is the exhibition of thought disjoined from  
257 practice. Its very home is supposed to be ease and retirement; and when it does more  
258 than speak or write, it is accused of transgressing its bounds. This indeed constitutes  
259 what is considered its true dignity and honour, viz. its abstraction from the actual affairs  
260 of life; its security from the world's currents and vicissitudes; its saying without doing. A  
261 man of literature is considered to preserve his dignity by doing nothing; and when he  
262 proceeds forward into action, he is thought to lose his position, as if he were degrading  
263 his calling by enthusiasm, and becoming a politician or a partisan. Hence mere literary  
264 men are able to say strong things against the opinions of their age, whether religious or  
265 political, without offence; because no one thinks they mean anything by them. They are  
266 not expected to go forward to act upon them, and mere words hurt no one.

267 Such are some of the more common or more extended specimens of profession without  
268 action, or of speaking without really seeing and feeling. In instancing which, let it be  
269 observed, I do not mean to say that such profession, as has been described, is always  
270 culpable and wrong; indeed I have implied the contrary throughout. It is often a  
271 misfortune. It takes a long time really to feel and understand things as they are; we  
272 learn to do so only gradually. Profession beyond our feelings is only a fault when we  
273 might help it;—when either we speak when we need not speak, or do not feel when we  
274 might have felt. Hard insensible hearts, ready and thoughtless talkers, these are they  
275 whose unreality, as I have termed it, is a sin; it is the sin of every one of us, in  
276 proportion as our hearts are cold, or our tongues excessive.

277 But the mere fact of our saying more than we feel is not necessarily sinful. St. Peter did  
278 not rise up to the full meaning of his confession, "Thou art the Christ," yet he was  
279 pronounced blessed. St. James and St. John said, "We are able," without clear  
280 apprehension, yet without offence. We ever promise things greater than we master, and  
281 we wait on God to enable us to perform them. Our promising involves a prayer for light  
282 and strength. And so again we all say the Creed, but who comprehends it fully? All we  
283 can hope is, that we are in the way to understand it; that we partly understand it; that we  
284 desire, pray, and strive to understand it more and more. Our Creed becomes a sort of  
285 prayer. Persons are culpably unreal in their way of speaking, not when they say more  
286 than they feel, but when they say things different from what they feel. A miser praising  
287 almsgiving, or a coward giving rules for courage, is unreal; but it is not unreal for the  
288 less to discourse about the greater, for the liberal to descant upon munificence, or the  
289 generous to praise the noble-minded, or the self-denying to use the language of the  
290 austere, or the confessor to exhort to martyrdom.

291 What I have been saying comes to this:—be in earnest, and you will speak of religion  
292 where, and when, and how you should; aim at things, and your words will be right  
293 without aiming. There are ten thousand ways of looking at this world, but only one right  
294 way. The man of pleasure has his way, the man of gain his, and the man of intellect his.  
295 Poor men and rich men, governors and governed, prosperous and discontented,  
296 learned and unlearned, each has his own way of looking at the things which come

297 before him, and each has a wrong way. There is but one right way; it is the way in which  
298 God looks at the world. Aim at looking at it in God's way. Aim at seeing things as God  
299 sees them. Aim at forming judgments about persons, events, ranks, fortunes, changes,  
300 objects, such as God forms. Aim at looking at this life as God looks at it. Aim at looking  
301 at the life to come, and the world unseen, as God does. Aim at "seeing the King in his  
302 beauty." All things that we see are but shadows to us and delusions, unless we enter  
303 into what they really mean.

304 It is not an easy thing to learn that new language which Christ has brought us. He has  
305 interpreted all things for us in a new way; He has brought us a religion which sheds a  
306 new light on all that happens. Try to learn this language. Do not get it by rote, or speak it  
307 as a thing of course. Try to understand what you say. Time is short, eternity is long; God  
308 is great, man is weak; he stands between heaven and hell; Christ is his Saviour; Christ  
309 has suffered for him. The Holy Ghost sanctifies him; repentance purifies him, faith  
310 justifies, works save. These are solemn truths, which need not be actually spoken,  
311 except in the way of creed or of teaching; but which must be laid up in the heart. That a  
312 thing is true, is no reason that it should be said, but that it should be done; that it should  
313 be acted upon; that it should be made our own inwardly.

314 Let us avoid talking, of whatever kind; whether mere empty talking, or censorious  
315 talking, or idle profession, or descanting upon Gospel doctrines, or the affectation of  
316 philosophy, or the pretence of eloquence. Let us guard against frivolity, love of display,  
317 love of being talked about, love of singularity, love of seeming original. Let us aim at  
318 meaning what we say, and saying what we mean; let us aim at knowing when we  
319 understand a truth, and when we do not. When we do not, let us take it on faith, and let  
320 us profess to do so. Let us receive the truth in reverence, and pray God to give us a  
321 good will, and divine light, and spiritual strength, that it may bear fruit within us.