

AN AGED MINISTER
COMMENDING HIS PEOPLE TO GOD.

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AN AGED MINISTER

COMMENDING HIS PEOPLE TO GOD,

Et c. Et c.

ACTS XX. 32.

And now brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them, which are sanctified.

PAUL, on his passage from Philippi to Jerusalem, came near to Ephesus, where he had before spent some successful seasons in preaching the gospel. As he was in haste to reach Jerusalem before the feast of Pentecost, which would give him an opportunity to preach to a large collection of people, he chose not to visit Ephesus, lest he should be too long detained; but he stopped at Miletus, about ten miles short of it, and sent to the Elders of Ephesus to meet him there. They came, and with them a number of the Christian brethren, to whom, on their arrival, Paul delivered an affectionate valedictory discourse, a part of which I have now read.

He gave them a summary of the doctrines, which he had preached, while he was among them. He appealed to them for the fidelity with which he had discharged his ministerial duties. He reminded them of the conflicts and self denials, which he had suffered in their service. He expressed his appre-

hension of greater, but unknown trials, which, whatever they might be, he was resolved to meet, without declining from the line of his duty. He warned them that this was the last interview, which he should enjoy with them, and that, after his departure, new dangers would arise from the attempts of designing men to break their union. He exhorted the Elders to watch over their respective flocks with the diligence, of which he had set them an example, and thus suggested to the brethren the necessity of preserving their union by a steady attendance on the ministry of their several pastors. He concluded the solemnity with an appropriate prayer, in which he commended them to God, and to the word of his grace, which was able to build them up, and to give them an inheritance among all those, who were sanctified."

In these words the Apostle expresses an affectionate concern for the Christians in Ephesus. He commends them to God's merciful care. And he encourages them to expect happy consequences from attending on God's word and confiding in his grace. We observe here,

I. That the apostle expresses an *affectionate concern* for the people and believers in Ephesus.

For this concern he mentions several reasons.

1. He had spent much *time* in *preaching* the gospel among them.

His office as an Apostle required him to visit various parts of the world. He was not the stated minister of any particular church, but a missionary ordained to carry the gospel among the Gentiles. There was a line of service assigned him by apostolic agreement, beyond which he did not stretch himself, to enter into the sphere of other men's labors. But this line was so extensive, that he could not abide long in any one city or village. In Ephesus he spent more time than in most other places. He was here for the space of three years. And he had

great success. Divers indeed were hardened ; but many believed. The church became so large, that several Elders were employed in ministering to it. Or perhaps, being too large to assemble in one place, it might be divided into several branches, each of which had an attendant pastor. When Paul preached there, not only the citizens of Ephesus, but almost all Asia came together to hear the word of the Lord.”

After his long residence and successful service among this people, they must have been greatly endeared to him. There is no relation more sacred and important, than that between a minister and his people. And the peaceable and useful continuance of it for a number of years will produce an affection more tender and sensible, than what is felt in most other relations. A people in such a case usually feel a cordial regard for their minister : But, I am persuaded, it is in no measure equal to the regard, which he feels for them. They seldom will make for him those sacrifices of temporal interest, which he can make for them. The affection is mutual ; but there is the same disparity, as in the affection between a parent and his children. What this disparity is, you, who are parents, well know.

When a minister, looking around on his people, views them as pilgrims on their passage to another world—when he considers, that he has been with them in all seasons, has shared in their afflictions, and has experienced their attention in his own—that many of them have been baptized by his hands, consecrated to God by his prayers, and educated under his ministry—that the present generation are soon to pass away, and to be succeeded by a new race of transient mortals, whose virtue and happiness will much depend on the instructions which they may receive from their parents, and from a succeeding minister ; he has feelings, to which a private Christian must be a stranger.

2. Paul's solicitude for the Christians in Ephesus was increased by a recollection of his *labors* and *sacrifices* in their cause.

His *labors* had been abundant. He says, "I have been with you in all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind and with many tears." He had not affected a superiority to their persons nor felt an indifference to their afflictions—but had stood on the ground of equality with them, and taken a sensible share in all their sorrows. He adds, "I have kept back nothing, that was profitable to you; and have taught you publicly; and also from house to house; when your circumstances called for my attendance. "I have testified repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ! He did not amuse them with dry and useless speculations; but preached those great truths, which essentially concerned their salvation. He took them to record, that "he was clear from the blood of all men."

This consciousness of his fidelity, while it filled his soul with comfort for himself, awakened his anxiety for them. Many had not received the love of the truth, nor felt its transforming power. They were yet in their sins. His faithful labors, though they would increase his own reward, would augment *their* guilt, and aggravate *their* future misery, if they should continue still in impenitence and unbelief. His preaching, which to some had been a favour of life unto life, he was afraid, would be to others a favour of death unto death.

His *sacrifices* in their service had been as great as his labors.

He says, "I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel; but these hands of mine have ministered to my necessities."

When Christ sent forth his disciples to preach among the *Jews*, who knew the commandment of God, that "they who served at the altar, should live of the altar," he forbade them to take purse or

scrip of their own, because "the laborer was worthy of his hire;" and if any would not receive and support them, they were expressly required from such to turn away, and bestow their labors elsewhere. But when Paul preached among *heathens*, who had never known this divine institution, he thought himself at liberty to make the gospel without charges to them.

We always feel an interest in a cause, in the prosecution of which we have expended and have been spent. If a minister has relinquished inviting prospects for the service of a people, he desires to see fruit, which may abound to their account. If after all his self denials for their sake, they appear to be little benefited by his ministry, and under it religion seems rather to have declined, than prevailed, painfully disappointed, he complains in the language of the prophet, "I have labored in vain, and spent my strength for nought." Paul, having reminded the *Corinthians*, that he had preached the gospel among them *freely*, and had sought, not *theirs*, but *them*, expressed his fears, lest, when he should come to them again, his God would humble him among them, and he should bewail many who had sinned, and had not repented.

3. Another circumstance which excited the Apostle's concern for the *Ephesian Christians* was the termination of his labors among them. "I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more."

He was now, by divine direction, going to *Jerusalem*. "He knew not what things would befall him, save that the Holy Ghost witnessed in every city, that bonds and afflictions awaited him. But none of these things moved him, neither counted he his own life dear to himself, so that he might finish his course with joy, and the ministry which he had received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

Though, in the consciousness of his fidelity, he trusted that death to him would be gain; yet he knew, that for the churches it might be needful that he should abide in the flesh. To have spent more time among these Ephesians would have gratified his benevolence; but God had otherwise ordained; and to God's will he must submit. He was now taking leave of a people, who for some years, had been dear to him as Christians and friends and seals of his apostleship. And between duty and affection there was an unavoidable conflict.

An aged minister may have similar sensations. His age gives him the same apprehensions, which personal dangers gave to Paul; that "they among whom he has gone preaching the gospel, soon will see his face no more." Finding himself one of the oldest of the ministerial brethren, and looking around on his assembled hearers, and seeing only here and there a person as aged as himself, he considers every year as the last of his ministry—every communion as perhaps the last time of his meeting his Christian brethren at the Lord's table; every sabbath as possibly the last, in which he shall speak to his beloved flock; yea, every sermon which he writes, as a kind of farewell sermon. And he wishes and prays, that it may meet the same attention, and leave the same impression, as if they all knew, that they should hear his voice no more.

4. What farther awakened Paul's anxiety for the Ephesians, was the peculiar *danger* which attended them. "I know that after my departure shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock; yea, also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them."

It appears from Paul's writings, that there were, in his time, many corrupt teachers and evil workers, who, under the vain pretext of superior knowledge and sanctity, were assiduous to make

divisions in the church of Christ. These he calls "grievous wolves." He knew, from their past, what would be their future conduct—that, when a gap was opened by his final departure, they would enter into the fold to make a prey of the flock. Yea he says "from among yourselves shall men arise" to co-operate with these evil workers. Saint John, speaking of false teachers, says, "They call themselves apostles, and are not, but do lie." The apostles were sent forth to form churches from among the *heathens*. In execution of their commission, they went from place to place, preaching the gospel, planting churches and ordaining pastors over them. These deceitful workers assumed to be apostles too! and under pretence of apostolic example, they went from church to church to make divisions in them, and gain proselytes from them to their own sect. But John says, their pretensions were false; they were not apostles, but liars. The churches had pastors of their own; and no man had a divine commission to make proselytes from the church to a sect, as the apostles had to make converts from heathenism to the church.

Saint Paul, foreseeing, what advantage some would take of his departure from Ephesus, and what dangers would arise to the Christians there from the arts of designing men gave them this faithful and seasonable warning; and it had a happy effect. John writing some years after to the elder of this same church, thus commends him, "I know thy works, and how thou canst not bear them who are evil, and hast tried them who say, they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars; thou hast laboured for my name's sake, and hast not fainted."

Having shewn the particular reasons of Paul's concern for the christians in Ephesus, we will,

II. Consider what is implied in "his commending them to God, and to the word of his grace."

1. This supposes, a *faith* in God's promise to preserve his church in times of danger, and *prayer* grounded on this promise.

There are, in relation to the *general* church, promises of divine care, which each particular church may apply for her encouragement. And there are also promises made to *particular* churches, that while they keep the word of God's patience, he will keep them from the hour of temptation, which shall come on the world.

Every church is dependent on God's *providence* to preserve her from outward trials; to secure her from internal disorders; to continue her in the enjoyment of her religious privileges; to give her a succession of faithful ministers; and to frustrate the designs of her open, and secret enemies.

She is dependent on God's *grace* to accompany the means of religion, and to render them successful in the edification of her present members and in the addition of new members.

The faithful minister, realizing his speedy departure from the people of his charge, and feeling a deep concern, that their spiritual prosperity may continue, after his labors among them shall have ceased, commends them to God in fervent prayer, hoping, that through the care of his providence, and the influence of his grace, they will be defended from evil, preserved in peace, and built up in the faith and order of the gospel.

Our divine Lord, when he was on earth gave himself much to prayer. In his petitions his disciples often had a share. When the time of his departure drew near, his intercessions for them were more frequent and importunate. Paul imitated his master's example. For the churches, to which he ministered, he prayed much while he was present with them, and more when he was absent from them; and still more, when he had no expectation of returning to them. In his letters he told them, how

affectionately he remembered them and how constantly he made mention of them at the throne of God. The last act of our Saviour, before his ascension, was committing his disciples to God's gracious keeping. "He lifted up his hands and blessed them and as he blessed them, he was parted from them. The last act of the apostle, before he departed from the brethren at Miletus, was "kneeling down and praying with them all."

2. When Paul said to these brethren, "I commend you to God," he exhorted them to commend *themselves* to God. There could be no reason, why he should pray for them, but what was also a reason, why they should pray for themselves. When, at the hour of parting, he prayed for them, he prayed not alone, but *with them all*; they all joined with him.

A people who expect, that their minister will soon be taken from them, ought seriously to realize the dangers attendant on a vacancy; and deeply impressed with a sense of these dangers, to commit themselves to the care, guidance and protection of God.

3. Paul here warns them, that they were not to expect God's care for them, and grace toward them, as a church, unless they retained the instituted ministry of the word, and faithfully attended upon it.

By commending them to God's *word*, he exhorted them to *have* God's word. How would the word be able to keep them, unless they were faithful to keep that? What could the word do for them, if they put it from them, and would neither provide for its being preached to them, nor hear it when it was preached? Thus they would judge themselves unworthy of eternal life.

My hearers; here is the plain advice, yea, the most pointed injunction of an inspired apostle, to every Christian society, to maintain the ministry of

the word among them ; to seek the resettlement of it, whenever it is discontinued ; and diligently to attend upon it, while they enjoy it.

This leads us to the

III^d. branch of our subject, which states the *benefits* resulting from the word of God's grace. "This is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them, who are sanctified."

The word is *able*—how it is able, the apostle here intimates ; It is the word of *God's grace* ; and elsewhere more fully expresses ; it is *mighty through God*. It is God, who, by the concurring influence of his grace, makes the faithful preaching of the word quick and powerful to recover sinners from their spiritual death, and to strengthen saints in the duties of a holy life. "We are not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God, who alone can make us able ministers of the New Testament."

The word, though mighty through God, is not always effectual to the conversion of sinners. "To some it is a favour of life unto life ; to some a favour of death unto death." There are those, who, when they have heard the word, put it far from them, and resist the spirit of grace which strives with them. Hence these cautions and exhortations, "quench not the spirit ; despise not prophesying. Lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the ingrafted word which is able to save your souls." The word, thus received, is able through the grace of God to build you up. It will build particular saints by increasing their knowledge, purity, zeal and love. It will build up the church by strengthening the bands of her spiritual union, and by adding new members to her body. Through the grace of God answering the prayers of saints, and accompanying the fidelity of parents, it will form the young to sentiments of piety, instill into them the knowledge and love of

the truth, train them up in the practice of virtue, and encourage them to join themselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant. The church is cleansed and sanctified by the word, that it may become glorious, and be presented before God without spot or wrinkle. Finally ; the word is able to *give you an inheritance*. What is this inheritance ?—It is “ an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, fading not away.” Where is it to be found ?— “ It is reserved in heaven.” And what is the condition of it and qualification for it ? It is “ an inheritance among them who are *sanctified*.” “ God sanctifies us by the truth ; his word is truth.” In our faithful attendance on this word we are to seek, and may hope to receive that grace, which is sufficient for us. The gospel is a ministration of the spirit ; and we receive the spirit in the hearing of faith.

My brethren ; I have opened to you the important instructions contained in my text. If I have not misjudged, they are pertinent to the occasion, on which I have invited your attendance in the house of God.

Yesterday completed the 50th year of my ministerial relation to you ; and the last day of October next will complete the seventy-fifth year of my age. My time of service has been, within five years, equal to that of both my predecessors. Our relation must soon be dissolved. There are in this county but four ministers, and but three *officiating* ministers, older than myself. Two only are left of those who composed the council at my ordination. Of those who were then members of this church, not one male, and but one female remains among us. Two others, who have removed from us, are, I hope, still living. Scarcely twenty of those who were then heads of families are among the living ; and of these I find but twelve within the parish. There are but about twenty, as old as myself ; and not more than thirty-one, or thirty-two who have surpassed seventy years.

Ten years ago, on a particular occasion, I gave you a summary history of the parish from the time of its incorporation. Some of the occurrences of the last ten years I shall now relate.

The number of persons, who within this time have died among us, is one hundred and seventy-nine, of whom twenty-seven were from seventy, twelve from eighty, and four from ninety years old and upward. In the last number were two Deacons, as eminent for their piety, as they were venerable for their age; *Atchinson* and *White*, the former in his ninety-second, and the latter in his ninety-fifth year, at the time of their death.

The persons baptized are one hundred and ninety-four, of whom sixteen were adults.

They who have joined our communion, including such as have transferred their relation from other churches, are eighty. I have a pleasing hope, that several others will soon be added to our number.

In the course of fifty years, the number of deaths has exceeded six hundred and fifty, which is more than the number of souls at the commencement of that period. The baptisms administered to children, whose parents were members of this church, have been one thousand and fifteen. Adult baptisms thirty-seven. And admissions to the Lord's table there have been three hundred and seventy.

Within the last ten years the increase of the parish has not been more than three or four families. The emigrations from it have been more numerous, than in any preceding period of the same length.

The year one thousand eight hundred was distinguished by sickness and mortality. There died in that year fifty persons; these made nearly a twentieth part of the number of souls in the parish, which was about one thousand and one hundred. We have never known a mortality equal to this.

During the period under review, you have been

so happy as to see your long controversy relative to the location of a meeting house, peaceably terminated by the erection of this house in which we are now assembled, and in which we have assembled for a little more than four years.

Your external circumstances are highly favorable. Your funds in money and lands are rich; the produce of them will go far towards the support of the ministry. Your husbandry is flourishing, and your wealth increasing. You enjoy a comfortable degree of internal tranquillity. You are not broken into sects. I do not know that there is any great diversity in your religious sentiments. If there is a diversity, it is accompanied with so much candor, charity and discretion, that it never has materially affected your social harmony.

Let brotherly love continue, and be ye perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.

The time is at hand, when the resettlement of the gospel ministry will be an object of your deliberations. Let there be no divisions among you. Let the prudence which, under providence, has hitherto led you in the paths of peace, direct all your future steps.

Remember, it is your indispensable duty to provide for the supply of a ministerial vacancy whenever it shall occur. Taking good advice, look out a man of respectable talents—of adequate education—of pious character—of evangelical principles, and of a candid mind—one who will teach the things which become sound doctrine—who will study the things which make for peace and who will be a pattern of good works.

Liberal support your minister, that he may give himself wholly to your service. Injustice to the gospel will bring leanness into your souls.

Attend on the word preached, and give earnest heed to the things which you hear. Require the

attendance of your children ; thus your minister will assist you in their education.

Follow peace with all men, and be at peace among yourselves. “ Mark them who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine, which ye have received, and avoid them ; for they who are such serve not the Lord Jesus Christ, but their own lust, and with good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” If there be any, who under pretence, that there can be no church without a conformity to their discriminating speculations and ceremonies, exclude you from their communion until you will come over to their sect and will adopt their peculiarities, and who thus endeavor to make divisions among you and draw away disciples after them ; these are the very persons, whom the apostle charges you to mark and avoid. To cause divisions is their object. From them the danger is greater, because they act under religious pretensions. By fair speeches they beguile the simple.

Maintain an accommodating spirit. Heavenly wisdom is pure, but peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated. In social transactions there will often be difference of opinion ; there will consequently be need of candor and condescension. No man should act in opposition to his brethren, where the matter in question is less important than the peace of society.

In choosing a minister, regard essential qualifications. If the general choice fall on a man possessed of these, all ought to acquiesce, though some smaller accomplishments may seem to be wanting. This is agreeable to Paul's advice to the Corinthians, when he heard that there were divisions among them ; and one said, I am of Paul ; and another I am of Apollos. In a word ; let the spirit of the gospel reign in all your hearts ; and peace will accompany all your transactions. Humility, meek-

ness, condescension and love are prominent traits in the christian character.

The peace and edification of this society will be much promoted by the wise and exemplary conversation of the *professed* members of the church.

Be ye, therefore, my brethren like minded one toward another ; love as brethren, be pitiful be courteous ; attend on all divine institutions with diligence ; let your speech be always with grace ; manifest a rational and steady zeal for the interest of religion ; exhibit its virtues in all your relations ; thus it will appear that God is among you of a truth and many will take hold of your skirts, and say, “ We also will go with you.”

I solemnly call upon all who believe the truth and feel the importance of the gospel, but have not openly professed it, to come forward without further delay, and join themselves to Christ's church, take a seat at his table, and honor him before all men. Live no longer in the neglect of a duty, which he has expressly enjoined on you. Remember also that every one who nameth the name of Christ, is required to depart from iniquity. All are bound to confess Christ's name, and to eat and drink in his presence ; but know, that this will avail you nothing, unless you obey him as your Lord, and do the things which he says.

Ye youths ; hereafter I shall not talk much with you. Recollect what I have heretofore spoken, and receive what I speak now. I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, that you attend to the concerns of your immortal souls ; that you acquaint yourselves with God, and be reconciled to him ; that you forsake the foolish and live, and go in the way of understanding ; that you devote yourselves to God in the profession and practice of religion ; and that you encourage one another in the ways of wisdom and piety. Entice not others to evil, nor consent when others would entice you ;

but consider one another to provoke unto love and good works. Let this be your mutual advice ; “ Come and let us go up to the house of the Lord, for he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths.” The continuance of the church will greatly depend on you. Your fathers are soon to depart ; their seats at Christ’s table are emptying from year to year, and will all soon be empty. Christ expects that you will come and fill them. Your parents have communicated his religion to you ; take it, carry it with you through life, and hand it over to the next generation. Sacred is the deposit in your hands ; solemn is your charge. If this deposit should be lost with you, what account will you be able to render ? The servant who hid his talent could say, “ Here thou hast that is thine.” What will you say, if the talent itself be lost ? The servant, who had been guilty of *neglect*, was consigned to utter darkness. If you shall be found guilty of *waste*, how great will be your darkness ?

My aged brethren and friends ; for many years we have dwelt together in unity ; and we have found how good and how pleasant it is. We are soon to part, and to see each others faces no more. Let us remember one another in our prayers ; and according to our time and strength be fellowworkers to the kingdom of God. If any of you have neglected to come to Christ’s table, I now affectionately intreat you to pay this honor to him and his religion on earth, before you go to abide with him in heaven.

Ye heads of families ; bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord ; maintain God’s worship in your houses ; walk in a perfect way ; allow no evil thing in your dwellings ; let nothing be heard from your lips, or seen in your conduct which shall tempt your children to think lightly of religion, or to suspect that you think lightly of it yourselves. Shun the places of vain

amusement and dissipated pleasure ; and let the hours of recess from the busy cares of life be sacred to mental improvement and domestic instruction and devotion. Anticipate the day, when you and your households must appear before the Lord Jesus at his coming ; may you and they appear with mutual congratulation, and with exceeding joy.

That at the close of the 50th, year of my ministry, I should meet you in the House of God, and impart a word of advice, was agreeable to my own feelings, and consonant to your wishes.

But to what purpose is advice, if it be forgotten and disregarded ? If the things which have been spoken are words of truth and soberness, allow me to believe, they will leave on your minds a deep impression—allow me to hope, that from this day's solemnity some happy effects will follow—allow me to expect, that there will be an increased attention to religion among the youth—that there will be order and devotion in all your houses—that there will be a general attendance on the worship of God's house—that from among persons of all ages there will be additions to the church. We hear of great attention to religion, and of an increase of the number of professors in the towns around us. Pray for the effusions of divine grace among us. That your prayers may be heard you must apply the means of grace. It is vain to expect, that prayers for the attainment of any object will avail, while the means relative to that object are neglected. God grants his spirit in the hearing of faith.

To see religion prevailing, the church increasing and the gospel going forth with power, and with the Holy Ghost and with much assurance, would be a pleasing spectacle. It would enliven our sacred pleasures, and brighten our heavenly prospects.

My friends ; If I should speak to you again, yet probably I shall never speak on an occasion so impressive as the present. I therefore, before I leave

this place, renew and urge my request, that the things which have been spoken, may be religiously regarded.

Shall I suspend my discourse for a moment, to hear from your lips, what you are speaking in your hearts?—Your inward language, methinks; is the answer of Israel to the farewell advice of aged Joshua. **THE LORD OUR GOD WE WILL SERVE; HIS VOICE WE WILL OBEY; GOD FORBID, THAT WE SHOULD FORSAKE HIM.** I reply in Joshua's words. *Ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye have chosen the Lord to serve him.* Methinks I hear you rejoin, **WE ARE WITNESSES.**

My brethren; accept my thanks for all that attention, candor and kindness, which I have experienced from you in the course of my ministry. I feel a confidence, that your friendly dispositions toward me will not cease in my declining age. Defects and errors proceeding from infirmity, your goodness will excuse. I hope you will see none which proceed from a heart unfeeling to religion, or unfriendly to you. I shall probably leave children and descendants among you. I hope, they may be peaceable and useful members of your society. If any of them should fall into adversity, or if an aged companion should survive, oppressed with infirmity, I trust, your attention and prayers will not cease; but you will shew kindness to the dead and to the living.

Brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace. Be perfect; be of good comfort; be of one mind; live in peace; and the God of peace and love be with you.