A SERMON

DELIVERED AT THE OPENING

OF

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE author of the following discourse had no desire, nor design, to communicate it to the public through the medium of the press; but at the earnest solicitation of the session of his own church, he consented, though with reluctance, to give it up for publication.

A SERMON, &c.

1 Cor. xiv. 12.

Seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.

THE cessation of those miraculous gifts, with which the christian church was endowed in the beginning, is an event of which there is no clear intimation in the New Testament, but there are several weighty reasons which may be assigned to account for it.

When the christian religion was fully established by the evidence of miracles, there was no longer any necessity for their continuance; for this evidence, having been once exhibited, must ever remain sufficient, and by means of authentic testimony, may serve for the conviction of all succeeding generations.

The frequency and long continuance of miracles would destroy their effect, and in time they would cease to furnish any conclusive argument in favour of revelation; or rather would cease to be miracles; for if it was as common for men to rise from the dead as to be born, there would be nothing miraculous in the one event more than in the other.

But a third reason is the abuse to which these spiritual gifts were subject. We might have supposed, that if any thing could have passed through the

hands of men without being perverted, it would have been these supernatural endowments, which were given by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit; but we learn from the sacred scriptures, especially from this epistle, that they were as much, and perhaps more, subject to abuse, than the talents possessed by nature or acquired by industry.

The Corinthian church was favoured with a rich variety of these gifts; but in the exercise of them their spiritual men fell into great disorder. Instead of using them for the edification of the church according to their original destination, they seemed disposed to pervert them to the purposes of ambition and vainglory. They were more desirous of possessing these gifts than of excelling in charity; and courted rather such as distinguished and exalted the individual, than such as tended to the edification and comfort of the church of God.

The apostle expresses his sentiments fully on this subject, in this and the two succeeding chapters; and having corrected their errors, and reproved them for their abuses, he advises them, since they were ambitious of spiritual gifts, to seek to excel or abound, (as the word should be translated) to the edifying of the church; that is, in those gifts which would enable them to be most useful in promoting the glory of God and the edification of the church.

Now, although the gifts to which the apostle refers have ceased, yet the exhortation in the text is as applicable to common as to supernatural endowments; for every qualification should be earnestly sought

which tends to the edification of the church; and talents should be desired by the ministers of the gospel only with this view. I purpose, therefore, in this discourse, to consider, first, wherein the edification of the church consists; and secondly, to mention some of those qualifications which will be most useful to the ministers of the gospel in promoting this object.

I. The word edification is borrowed from architecture, and literally signifies the progress of a building. This appears to be a favourite allusion with the apostle Paul when speaking of the increase of the church; and the figure is very beautiful and comprehensive. The structure of an elegant building, especially of a magnificent temple, is among the highest efforts of human skill. It is a work which requires the aid of almost every art; and cannot be accomplished without the application of much wisdom and power.

The principal things, in the erection of an edifice, which deserve attention are the foundation, the plan, the materials and the decoration.—The foundation is an essential thing. The most beautiful building may be brought to a speedy dissolution by a want of solidity in its basis; and it should not only be solid, but sufficiently extensive to receive the whole pile which is designed to be erected on it.

The plan of the work is also of primary importance. As a large house must consist of a variety of parts, and as a multitude of workmen must be employed, if every one should pursue his own plan, or if they should divide themselves into separate parties, and proceed without respect to an uniform plan, and without

regarding the design and labours of one another, the consequence would be, that the different parts of the building would not only grow out of all just proportion, but might interfere with, and destroy one another; until at length, the whole edifice would fall into ruins, or stand an unshapely and useless pile, the derision of every spectator.

The materials of a building should be of good quality, and should be arranged in due order; every part occupying its own place, and not heaped promiscuously together. If an architect should build on a good foundation, fragile or perishable materials; if, for example, he should pile up " wood, hay or stubble," instead of employing solid mineral substances, he would deservedly suffer great loss of reputation in the estimation of all who might be acquainted with the fact; or, if a workman should put the weakest materials in the place of the strongest, or cement them together with untempered mortar, he would gain but little credit or emolument by his labour.

Finally, a building is incomplete until it have received its decorations, and is furnished with every thing necessary for the accommodation of its inhabitants, or for the performance of the service for which it was designed.

The application to the church of these ideas, which occur in contemplating the progress of a building, is so natural and obvious, that it would be tedious to run the parallel in detail. With only a general reference to these particulars, therefore, I will proceed to state, that the edification of the church consists in the

maintenance and advancement of " truth, unity, purity and felicity." These four words include every thing which enters into the idea of the increase and perfection of the church.

I. Truth is the foundation on which the whole building rests. Take this away, and religion will be mere superstition; morality, a matter of convenience; and the most fervent devotion, enthusiasm.

Truth is the subject of knowledge. It is the object of faith, and furnishes the proper motives to all pious and benevolent affections. It delineates the path of duty, and shows us with certainty the kind and degree of happiness which is attainable. It is a clear and heavenly light, deprived of which the understanding would be as useless and inconvenient as the eyes without the natural light.

This, however, is a word of very extensive signification. It embraces the universe. Substances and qualities, facts and propositions, ideas and declarations are all included under this comprehensive term. But we are not called to explore the whole circle of truths in the universe. This infinite object is only within the grasp of the divine Intellect, which surveys, with one comprehensive view, all possible and actual existences. Our situation, with respect to truth, resembles our condition in relation to the light of the sun. Although infinite rays are scattered from this luminous orb, in all directions, yet we are only concerned with those which come near to us, and of these it is only a small portion which we have occasion to use; so the number of truths, which can be known by

man, is comparatively small, and of attainable truths there are few which are absolutely necessary.

Of these some are discoverable by the light of nature; for, although I admit, that there are no *innate ideas*, properly speaking, yet I maintain that there are some *first truths* or *self-evident principles*, to which every rational mind assents, as soon as they are proposed. I believe, moreover, that there are such truths in morals, in which all men do as certainly agree as in any mathematical axioms; and which no man retaining his reason can by any art or effort disbelieve. These are the stock on which all others must be engrafted. If there were no such thing as the light of nature, or a discernment of some evident moral truths, a revelation might be addressed, with as much reason, to a brute as to a man. All argument and every species of proof and illustration would be to him useless on this subject. This, however, does not imply that all men do actually contemplate these truths, any more than they do those necessary truths which lie at the foundation of the science of *number* and *quantity;* nor does it imply that the knowledge of the Deity, which is so general in the world, is the result of reasoning or the discovery of natural light. The contrary of both these I believe to be the fact. Uncivilized men think of little beyond the immediate objects of their senses and appetites; and as to such a process of reasoning as that which proves the existence of God, they are as much strangers to it, as they are to the most abstruse demonstrations in mathematics. All that I maintain is, that there are some truths so evident, that all men

are under the necessity of assenting to them, from the very constitution of their nature, as soon as they are distinctly proposed to the mind; and that there are others so obviously deducible from these, that the reasoning by which they are established produces conviction in every person who attends to it. Thus far does the light of nature go in all; and we ought not to disparage it, for it is as much the gift of God as inspiration itself.

Revelation proceeds upon the principle, that men do possess some knowledge of moral subjects, and a feeling of moral obligation. This is as much taken for granted, in every part of the scriptures, as that they are possessed of an instinctive desire of happiness and aversion to misery.

But if we were left to nature's light, dark and wretched would be our condition. Even if reason were cultivated, and we should deduce by logical inference every truth for which there are *data* in nature, our situation would not be mended. So far is it from being true, that the light of reason is sufficient, that the more clearly this light shines, the more distinctly would man perceive that his situation was miserable, and as far as he could judge, hopeless.

The truths, most important to the peace and salvation of men, are revealed only in the sacred scriptures. The plan of redemption is here gradually unfolded, from the first dawn of light in paradise, until the *Sun of Righteousness* arose with all his splendour on a benighted world.

Christ himself is the truth. He has not only revealed the truth, but all the rays of this divine light are concentrated in him. From his face the divine glory beams forth with its brightest lustre. The wisdom, power, justice, purity, love and faithfulness of God are here clearly exhibited. In *his* actions and sufferings, the spirituality and extent of the law of God, and the nature and just deserts of sin are set forth in a stronger light than any words could represent them. So completely does the character of Jesus Christ as Mediator involve all important truth, that no dangerous error can be conceived which does not affect our views of his personal dignity or mediatorial work. This, therefore, is said to be "eternal life," or all that is necessary to obtain "*eternal life*," to "know the only true God and *Jesus Christ* whom he hath sent." To "*preach Jesus Christ and him crucified*," includes the whole range of doctrines taught by the apostle Paul. The aspect of every dispensation, of every institution, of every leading fact and principal prediction in the whole system of revelation is turned toward the incarnate Son of God. In him is contained that mystery of godliness, which through eternity will be developing, for the instruction and entertainment of saints and angels.

In proportion as the doctrines which relate to Christ the Redeemer are understood, received and reduced to practice, does the edifice of the church stand firmly on its basis; and in proportion as these are extended and propagated, the glorious building is enlarged. The prophets and apostles who speak of the Messiah

may, on that account, be called the foundation; but "Jesus Christ himself is the chief corner stone, in whom all the building fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord."

Both in ancient and modern times, the assaults of the enemies of the church have been directed against this corner stone; and although the *gates of hell* have failed of success in their attempts to shake this *rock* on which the church is built, yet as the malice of Satan is incapable of being extinguished or mitigated, we may expect renewed attacks, until the time of his confinement shall arrive. In our own times, infidelity has come in like a flood, and threatened to inundate the church with a horrible species of philosophical atheism. The torrent swelled high and raged with fearful impetuosity; but its violence has now abated, and the danger from this *source* appears to be in a good measure over. But the watchmen on the walls of Zion ought not to lie supinely down, or nod upon their posts, but should endeavour to observe the motions of the enemy so successfully, that they may be able to give seasonable warning of the kind of assault, which may next be expected.

From the signs of the times, I apprehend the danger to evangelical truth which will now arise will be from two opposite points: From what is called *rational christianity*, and *enthusiasm*.

Most of those speculative men, who were lately inclined to deism, will now fill the ranks of Socinianism, or Unitarianism, as they choose to denominate their religion. The errors of idolized reason are very dan-

gerous, because they have for their abetters the learned and powerful of this world, and the influence of their example is very extensive.

These opinions, however, are not likely to spread very widely amongst the common people, as they divest religion of all its awful and interesting attributes; so that the more sincerely and fully any person becomes a convert to this system, the more indifferent he will become to all religion. But no religion will engage the attention of people generally, unless it be calculated to interest their feelings. It appears to me, therefore, that enthusiasm is likely to spread more extensive mischief among the unlearned, than any species of free-thinking. The passions excited by enthusiasm, it is true, are too violent to be lasting; but the evil produced is, nevertheless, often permanent. Enthusiasm and superstition have commonly been represented as the two extremes in religion; but to me it appears, that they are near akin, and succeed each other as cause and effect. The wild ebullitions of enthusiasm when they subside, leave their subjects under the fatal influence of some absurd opinions which become the creed of a *new sect;* and almost invariably such superstitious customs are adopted, as are effectual to shield them from every approach of truth. So that these errors are often perpetuated for many generations, and at last only die with the extinction of the people who held them.

It is curious to observe, how nearly extremes sometimes approach each other in their ultimate effects. No two things appear more opposite in their origin

and operation, than Unitarianism and enthusiasm—The one proceeding from the pride of reason, the other from the exuberance of the imagination—The one renouncing all pretensions to divine assistance, the other professing to be guided by inspiration at every step: yet in this they agree, that they equally tend to discredit and set aside the authority of the scriptures of truth. The rationalist will not receive many of the doctrines of revelation, because they do not accord with his preconceived notions, which he calls the dictates of reason. The enthusiast will not submit to the authority of scripture, because he imagines that he is under the direction of a superior guide. The one makes his own reason the judge of what he will receive as true from the volume of revelation; the other determines every thing, whether it relate to opinion or practice, by the suggestions of his fancied inspiration.

On the errors which arise from both these quarters, we should keep a watchful eye; and against them we should make a firm and faithful stand. On the one hand, we must unequivocally deny to *reason* the high office of deciding at her bar, what doctrines of scripture are to be received and what not; and on the other, we must insist, that all opinions, pretensions, experiences and practices must be judged by the standard of the word of God.

"To the law and to the testimony" let us make our appeal against every species of error; "if they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them."

The second thing included in the edification of the church, is *unity*.

That the church of Christ is catholic, and ought to form one undivided body, is too evident, and too generally admitted, to need any demonstration. As there is but "one Lord, but one faith, but one baptism, but "one Father of all, one Spirit, one hope of our call-"ing," certainly there should be but one body; and all the members of that body are bound "to keep the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Christ, "when he ascended up on high, led captivity cap-"tive, and gave gifts unto men: some, apostles; and "some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, "pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints "for the work of the ministry; for the edifying of the "body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the "faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a "perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the "fulness of Christ, who is the head from whom the "whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by "that which every joint supplieth, according to the "effectual working in the measure of every part, "maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of "itself in love." "For as the body is one, and hath "many members, and all the members of that one "body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, "whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be "bond or free, and have all been made to drink into "one spirit."

But, although there is an agreement among chris-

tians, about the propriety and obligation of church unity, yet it is a matter of dispute wherein this unity consists, and by what it is broken. Perhaps a better definition of it cannot be given than in these words of the apostle Paul—" to walk by the same rule, to mind the same thing." Unity without agreement is a solecism. If all the professed christians in the world should adopt the same name, and submit to the same ecclesiastical government, it would not come up to the scripture idea of unity. Those attempts, therefore, which have for their object the bringing into the same society, and under the same denomination, people of widely different sentiments, are deserving of little commendation. The nearer such jarring materials are brought together, the greater will be the discord. Truth, and an agreement in the acknowledgment of truth, are the only solid foundation of christian unity and peace. But here the great difficulty occurs. Is it to be expected that perfect uniformity of opinion and practice can exist, consistently with free inquiry? The doctrines, the inferences, the reasonings and incidental questions, which may arise out of the scriptures, are infinite. To suppose that an agreement in all these, or in as many of them as may happen to be brought under consideration, is essential to the unity of the church, is indeed to make it an unattainable object; for probably there are no two men, nor ever were, who agreed in every question which related to religion. I take it for granted, therefore, that such an uniformity is not required; as we ought not to suppose that the exalted Head of the church would prescribe

and enjoin a kind of unity which is impracticable. I would not, however, be understood to intimate that there is a radical difference in the structure of the minds of men: for I am of opinion, that if every film of ignorance and mist of prejudice could be removed, and the same evidence of truth be exhibited to the understandings of all men, their judgments would in all cases be as much alike, as their perceptions of the colours of objects by the eye; but nothing, except inspiration of the highest kind, could place men in such a situation.

That which seems necessary to the solution of this difficulty is to determine how far this agreement must extend. What truths shall we require others to acknowledge, before we will unite with them? I answer, only such as are fundamental; and if the question be proposed, What truths are fundamental? I answer, only such as are necessary to be known and received, in order to constitute a person, a sincere disciple of Jesus Christ: for, if every error or imperfection in knowledge be made a bar to our acknowledgment of one another as members of Christ's body, then there is an end not only of catholic unity, but of all christian society. Upon these principles, every man in the world would be cast out of the church; for perfect freedom from error is as little to be expected in this life, as perfect freedom from sin. I see no other leading mark to guide us in drawing the line, but the one already mentioned. Still, however, the difficulty remains undiminished, and the question returns, What truths are essential to the constitution of a real chris-

tian? To this question, I confess, I find it to be impossible to give a definite answer, which will be applicable to all cases; for to a man in one situation that knowledge may be essential, which to another differently situated may be less important. An error may be fundamental to a man educated under favourable circumstances, which would not be so to a person just converted to christianity from a savage state. But, although the exact limits, between truths which are essential to salvation and those which are not, cannot be defined with accuracy, yet we may keep on the safe side of this line, without insnaring the consciences of sincere christians, or producing schism in the body of Christ. In the beginning, creeds and formulas of doctrine were short and general. The abstruse and knotty questions, which have since filled the christian world with contention, were not thought of; and happy had it been for the church if this primitive simplicity had continued. But the application of a vain philosophy and subtile logic to divine truth, multiplied articles of faith, and engendered endless contentions. This is a matter of deep regret, but the blame does not so properly belong to the orthodox church, which increased from time to time her articles of faith, as to the heretics who, by starting and propagating new errors continually, rendered it necessary that the opposite truths should be distinctly stated and defended.*

* The evil which attends the multiplication of articles of faith is, that dogmas come to be included in them, which are either not contained in the word of God, or not explicitly stated and determinately fixed by that infallible standard. When one un-

But, there is another obstacle in the way of unity, which seems to be of great magnitude. Those who may agree in fundamentals, and who may acknowledge each other as members of the catholic church, may yet differ in so many minor points, that they cannot harmoniously worship together, nor join in church communion with mutual edification.

Perhaps this difficulty will not be found so insuperable, on close examination, as it appears on the first glance. Christian unity does not require all the members of the catholic body to worship in one assembly, or to join in communion at the same table. As this, in its full extent, is naturally impossible, so as far as it is practicable it may not be expedient. Among peo-

qualified assent is required by a church to things of this kind, it lays the foundation of schism. For supposing that all the propositions required to be believed, are true, yet if they are such as real christians, in the honest pursuit of truth, may differ about, they ought not to be made articles of *faith*, or terms of communion, for the reasons which have already been offered. And it often happens that propositions, which have been received into the creed of a church in order to oppose some prevailing error, in the course of time become unintelligible or liable to misconstruction, with all those who do not know the particular opinions against which they were levelled, and the history of the times when the error sprung up and was opposed. It would seem very proper when a false doctrine, which caused the introduction of a particular article of belief, has fallen into oblivion, that the article itself should be rescinded, were it not that the alteration or abolition of articles of religion has the appearance of renouncing the doctrines contained in them, and therefore ought not to be ventured upon, unless some real inconvenience be found to result from their continuance.

ple of the same denomination, and under the same rules of government and discipline, it often happens, that there is such a diversity in some modes of worship, and also in opinion about circumstantial matters, that the members of the same body cannot worship or commune together with harmony. But nobody supposes that these trivial differences break or disturb the unity of the church. And if a number of churches united together should hold some peculiar opinion, or adopt some peculiar practice in worship, or even if they should regulate their church government upon a different plan from others, why should this be considered as an infraction of unity, any more than in the other case, as long as their peculiarities do not affect fundamentals in doctrine or essentials in worship? If indeed, this section of the church should denounce all other christians as heretics, and anathematize all who differed ever so little from them; or if they should consider all the ministrations in other churches as unauthorized and invalid, so that they would think it necessary to rebaptize their members upon their coming to join them, or, if ministers, to re-ordain them; this would be a direct violation of the unity of the church: and all those who proceed in this way are chargeable with making a schism in the body of Christ. It is not every separation which amounts to schism. Christians may differ in opinion about matters of comparatively small importance, and in consequence may find it convenient to form different associations, whilst they still keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There are at present, several denomi-

nations of christians in this country, who manage their own affairs without mutual association, or any direct intercommunity; and yet they love each other, and acknowledge each other as members of the catholic church. The only thing, in my view, which is wanting to complete the unity of these bodies, is some *convention*, or general bond of union, which might be considered as a mutual and public acknowledgment of each other.

With respect to this matter, I think I may be permitted to say, that our church has manifested a christian and liberal spirit, without losing sight of the great principles on which every firm union must rest.

But that, which especially calls for our attention, is, the duty of preserving peace and unity in that department of the church, over which the Lord hath made us overseers. Our body is now large and widely extended. Some diversity of opinion and practice may be expected; but the progress of schism (which has already made its appearance) would be a most disastrous event. There is a great difference between a schism of long standing, and one of recent date. The former, where there has not been a departure into dangerous error, generally becomes innoxious, after the lapse of a certain time. It is like a fracture, which though not well set, is healed again and gives no further pain; but a new schism is like a fresh wound, which must go through the process of inflammation and suppuration before it can be healed at all. Religious controversy, among the people at large, will ever be the bane of piety and of every social virtue.

It enkindles the worst passions, and drives men to the greatest extremes. It is not necessary that the points in dispute should be of great magnitude to render religious controversy virulent and malignant; yea, often the more imperceptible the shades of difference, the more furiously do the waters of contention boil. This very thing has already brought indelible disgrace upon the christian name; and it is a subject which well deserves the attention of the clergy: for who ever heard of a schism which did not originate from the pride, resentment, or misguided zeal of those who were called the ministers of Christ? And it is a lamentable truth, that talents, which qualify a man to do little good, enable him to do much mischief. So much easier is it to destroy than to edify. Many architects of the greatest eminence, whose names are now buried in oblivion, must have been for a long time employed in rearing the celebrated temple of Diana at Ephesus; but one poor miscreant immortalized his name, by burning it down in a single night.

Let us therefore be on our guard against the demon of discord, and let us "be of one mind, and live in peace, and the God of love and peace shall be with us."

The third thing in order is purity. This respects the worship and the discipline of the church. The purity of worship is corrupted first by paying divine honours to other objects besides the true God. The heathens fell universally into this abominable practice. The Jews also were prone to idolatry; and even the christian church has been exceedingly corrupted by the introduction of improper objects of

worship, such as saints, angels, the virgin Mary, relics, crucifixes, images and the consecrated host.

But secondly. The worship of God is corrupted by mingling with the instituted rites of religion, unmeaning or superstitious ceremonies. The imagination of man has ever been fertile in producing a multiplicity of religious services; but with respect to the whole of them, the challenge of the Almighty is, "Who hath required this at your hands?" Some things indeed, in the mode of conducting the worship of God, must be discretionary, and these should be regulated by the general rules; "Let all things be done decently, and in order." "Let all things be done to edification."

The common pretext for burdening the service of the church with ceremonies is, that it is decent and becoming, that a Being so august and glorious, should be worshipped with pomp and magnificence: but Jehovah "dwelleth not in temples made with hands." "The heaven is his throne, and the earth his footstool." In vain do we attempt by rites of our own invention, to honour Him, whom the "heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain." Such attempts are rather indicative of grovelling, than exalted conceptions of the Supreme Being, for as to the pomp of unmeaning ceremonies, it is infinitely beneath his regard.

The strongest argument for introducing ceremonies into the worship of God, is derived from the effect which they are supposed to have, in engaging the attention, and impressing the heart. But this effect is

transient; for when their novelty wears off, these ceremonies answer no other purpose than to conceal the true nature of religion from the inconsiderate mind. The substance is lost by attention to minute forms. The people are generally inclined to look no further than the surface, and having run through the round of ceremony, sit down contented with themselves, whilst they remain ignorant of the nature or necessity of spiritual worship. Indeed this argument supposes the worshippers of God to be in a very rude and uncultivated state, who like children, can be engaged and pleased with mere ceremony and unmeaning parade. A correct and cultivated mind perceives the greatest sublimity and dignity to be allied to the most perfect simplicity. This is the leading feature in the aspect of nature, and also in the finest works of art, especially in architecture. It is observed by a late traveller, that the superb columns, arches, domes, &c. which are still visible in upper Egypt, are formed with such perfect simplicity, that there is no such thing to be seen as any part, figure or device, intended merely for ornament. The taste of those great artists, who designed and executed these stupendous works, was perfectly correct. And those who undertake to be builders in the spiritual temple of the Lord, should be careful not to disfigure the edifice by childish ornament.

It ought, however, to be observed, that purity of worship is no how inconsistent with the highest excellence in the performance of every part of divine service. And on this subject, permit me to observe,

that in the external worship of our church, I know of nothing which needs improvement, more than the music with which we offer up our praises to God. As this is an instituted part of worship, it was certainly intended that it should be performed in such a way, as to produce the effects which good music is calculated to produce. But a great part of the singing of our churches is little better than recitation. The kind of music for which I plead, is vocal music; of all others, the most perfect, the best suited to devotion, and corresponding best with the simplicity of divine worship.

I will now make a few remarks on the subject of purity, as it respects the discipline of the church. The first thing here which deserves our attention, is the introduction of suitable men into the ministry. If you would have a well disciplined army, you must begin by appointing good officers. There is no subject which more deserves the attention of our church when met in general assembly than this. The deficiency of preachers is great. Our vacancies are numerous, and often continue for years unsupplied, by which means they are broken up or destroyed. Our seminaries of learning, although increasing in literature and numbers, furnish us with few preachers. This state of affairs calls loudly for your attention. Some measures have already been adopted by the recommendation of the general assembly to remedy this evil; but although they promise considerable success, yet they are inadequate to the object. In my opinion, we shall not have a regular and sufficient supply of well qualified minis-

ters of the gospel, until every presbytery, or at least every synod, shall have under its direction a seminary established for the single purpose of educating youth for the ministry, in which the course of education from its commencement shall be directed to this object: for it is much to be doubted, whether the system of education pursued in our colleges and universities is the best calculated to prepare a young man for the work of the ministry. The great extension of the physical sciences, *and the taste and fashion of the age*, have given such a shape and direction to the academical course, that, I confess, it appears to me to be little adapted to introduce a youth to the study of the sacred scriptures.

The consequence of the deficiency of well qualified preachers has been, that some have been disposed to venture upon the dangerous expedient of introducing men who were destitute of the literary qualifications required by our directory. And here permit me to suggest, whether the rule, which prescribes the kind and degree of learning which presbyteries shall require of candidates, is not susceptible of amendment. As it now stands, it is rather a standard to which we wish to be conformed, than a rule with which we strictly comply. I believe it is a fact that no presbytery in our body has been able, uniformly, to obey the letter of this law; and this frequency of violation in all, has led some to dispense with it altogether. I think, therefore, if from the circumstances of our churches, there be a necessity for deviating from this rule in any degree, it would be better to recommend to the

presbyteries such an alteration as would authorize this proceeding.

The end of all our labours, however, should be to promote holiness in the great body of the church. The necessity of purity of heart and life, in order to salvation, is indispensable. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." "Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." But on this subject it would be improper for me to enlarge at present.

As our standard of doctrine and discipline declares that all baptized persons are members of the church and under its government, we should endeavour to promote purity by a careful attention to the religious education of children. On this point the doctrine of our church is right, but our practice is generally wrong. We baptize children, but we do not treat them afterwards as members of the church. They are not kept under a wholesome discipline, and as they grow up, admonished, exhorted and restrained as they should be. This species of discipline has been so long relaxed, and is so much in opposition to the indolent and corrupt feelings of human nature, that to restore it is difficult, and must require time. But we should immediately betake ourselves to the work, and do what we can. The relinquishment of this principle, and the practice arising out of it, have produced incalculable evil in our churches; and may be considered as one chief cause why many once flourishing congregations have dwindled into insignificance. If a general reformation ever take place, it must begin here. The proper education of children, and discipline of youth, are

the most important of all means in producing purity in the church.

There is another plan of discipline which has gained much credit of late, and savours of greater strictness and purity, which considers none as properly members of the visible church, but such as exhibit evidences of vital piety. Although it is true that all members of the church are under the most solemn obligations to be truly pious, and all their hopes derived from mere profession, privileges or external performances are deceitful; yet it ever has been, and ever will be found, that all attempts of man to draw a visible line between the regenerate and unregenerate are ineffectual. In theory the plan is plausible, but in practice it is seen to be impossible. But perhaps it may be thought that we should endeavour to make the separation as completely as possible. I answer, that the thing is not only impracticable but unwarrantable. As we have not the necessary knowledge, so we are not invested with the proper authority. At the same time I admit that men of scandalous lives, and propagators of heretical opinions, should be solemnly excluded from the church; and that all persons within her pale should be dealt with, when they need it, by the discipline of reproof, admonition, censure and suspension. I also admit, that in receiving persons into the church, or to its distinguishing privileges, we should examine whether they have the requisite knowledge, and are of regular lives; and that we should then, and constantly afterwards, inform them of the absolute necessity of regeneration, faith

and a holy life, and may with propriety enter into free conversation with them on the subject of experimental religion; but to undertake to determine whether they are regenerate or not, is no part of our duty as officers of the church of Christ. This is a prerogative which he hath reserved to himself, and which he will publicly exercise at the appointed time.*

* In reality, this plan of discipline, if it could be carried into complete effect, would contravene one principal end for which the visible church was established, that is, to serve as a school in which disciples might be instructed in the christian religion from the very rudiments; or as a nursery in which the seeds of genuine piety might be implanted. Can we admit the idea that after the church is established, the most important instructions and the greatest blessings of the gospel covenant must be received without her pale? And I ask where received? In the world, in the kingdom of darkness! Surely the ordinary birth place of God's children is his own house, which is the church. It is Zion which brings forth children when she travails. To her appertain the promises, the ordinances of the gospel, the ministers of the word and all the usual and stated means of grace. But it may be asked what advantage is there in receiving or retaining those in the church who are not regenerate. I answer, *much every way*, chiefly because they are hereby placed in the situation most favourable to their salvation. But ought not all members of the church to be truly pious? They ought; and that they may become so, they should be continued in her connexion. If casting them out would hasten their conversion, then it ought to be done; but how can this be supposed?

The question may arise, who are then to be admitted into the visible church? and when is it proper to exclude any from this society? I answer all those who acknowledge Christ to be the anointed prophet of God and Saviour of the world, and who profess a desire to be instructed in his religion, may and ought to be

On the fourth particular I shall say nothing at present, as this is not the place of the church's rest and enjoyment, except that the true felicity of the body, while here in the wilderness, will be most effectually advanced by promoting truth, unity and purity.

I will now, agreeably to the plan proposed, mention some of those gifts and qualifications, by excelling in which, the ministers of the gospel may most effectually edify the church.

received into the visible church; and as we are capable of receiving instructions and deriving benefit from Christ as a teacher and Saviour, before we are competent to judge and act for ourselves, all infants or minors under the care and tuition of members of the church who are willing to undertake to give them a christian education, ought to be received as disciples into the school of Christ, that from their infancy they may grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And as to exclusion from the church, it should be regulated by the same principle. When the authority of the head of the church is denied, or his word and ordinances openly contemned, or when such a course of conduct is pursued as tends to the dissolution and destruction of the society, then, and not till then, is it proper to excommunicate a member from the visible church of Christ.

Some may perhaps infer from what has been said on this subject, that a foundation is laid for the indiscriminate admission of all baptized persons to the table of the Lord; but this consequence does by no means follow. The admission of a person into a society does not entitle him at once to attend on all the mysteries of that society. Many things may be necessary to be first learned, and many steps to be taken, before the novice is prepared for the higher privileges of the society. In the christian church, there is no ordinance or duty concerning which there are such solemn cautions left on record as that of the Lord's supper. An unworthy attendance contracts the guilt of "crucifying the Lord afresh,"

The first attainment, which I shall mention, is a profound and accurate knowledge of the sacred scriptures. This knowledge, although very important, and indeed indispensably necessary, is very difficult of acquisition. To ascertain what opinions other men have formed of the truths of scripture, and what controversies have been agitated respecting particular points of doctrine, is not so very difficult; but to study the sacred oracles for ourselves, and in the midst of the dust of contention, and in despite of the prejudices of education and of party, to elicit the true meaning of the Holy Ghost, requires an ardent love of truth, an unwearied attention, unshaken fortitude and invincible perseverance in the student of sacred literature.

and every man is required "to examine himself" before he approaches the sacred table. This subject it is probable has been much misunderstood by many serious people, who have been kept back from this important duty rather by a superstitious dread than godly fear; but still there is great necessity to warn the members of the church not to approach rashly, nor without due preparation. All who are in the church are no doubt under solemn obligations to obey this dying command of their Saviour; but there is an order to be observed in the performance of duties, and according to this order preparation precedes attendance. As in the case of the passover, the duty was obligatory on all the people of Israel, but if by any means the preparation of the sanctuary were wanting, it was judged expedient to defer the performance of the duty until it could be obtained; so with respect to the Lord's supper, it is a duty incumbent on all, but not always as soon as they become members of the church, but when they are sufficiently instructed and duly prepared *to discern the Lord's body*.

We, who live in this remote age and distant country, labour under peculiar disadvantages in the study of the sacred scriptures. They are written in languages difficult to be acquired by us, both on account of the scarcity of suitable books and teachers of competent skill, and hard to be perfectly understood, by any in consequence of having for so many centuries remained dead. And in the volume of inspiration, there are continual references to the customs, transactions and prevailing sentiments of the people to whom they were originally addressed, and of those concerning whom they speak; all which things are now with great difficulty ascertained.

Translations of the scriptures we have, both in ancient and modern languages, and an excellent one in our own tongue; but surely the expounders of a law ought to be able to read it in the original. The judge of a law which related only to life, liberty or property, would not be tolerated if he depended merely on a translation in making up his opinions. Nothing but absolute necessity should hinder us from studying the scriptures in the original languages. And although it is a study which will require much labour and time, yet it will richly repay those who persevere in it, and will enable them to promote the edification of the church more effectually than literary acquirements of any other kind. I hope that the time is approaching, when all other studies will, among theological students, yield the precedence to oriental literature, that is to the study of the BIBLE; and that other branches of

learning will be prized only as they afford assistance in the elucidation of the inspired volume.

When those who are designed for the ministry shall be acquainted with the scriptures from their childhood, and when those invested with the sacred office shall with an undivided attention and with an ardent love of truth study the inspired scriptures, then we may expect that error will be eradicated, the schisms of the church healed, and primitive purity restored.

Another quality which is of great importance in the ministers of the gospel, and by abounding in which they will promote the edification of the church, is *a pacific spirit.* The church of God would never have exhibited the unnatural spectacle of a house divided against itself, if all the professed ministers of Jesus had been constantly possessed of a competent portion of the meek and humble spirit of their master.

If we value the peace and unity of the church of Christ which he hath purchased with his own blood, if we regard the salvation of our own souls and that of our hearers, let us endeavour to divest ourselves of all pride and ambition, of all envy, jealousy, and unchristian resentments, and let us be clothed with humility and cultivate that peaceable temper which is so congenial with the religion which we profess and teach.

A friendly pacific spirit amongst the clergy towards each other, is of the utmost importance to the peace and edification of the church: but if, instead of this, they should view each other's conduct with that jaundiced eye which discolours every action—or if

they are disposed to pervert to an ill sense, every word of a brother which may have the least obliquity when compared with their own rule—If when convened to transact the business of the church they should ever so far lose sight of the principles which should govern them, as to be determined, *at all events*, upon carrying their own measures and supporting their own opinions, and should be disposed to bear down with authority, or repel with acrimony, every thing which may not coincide with their own views; then, we may bid adieu to unity and concord.

Our office, as preachers of the gospel, is always important; but we are never loaded with a heavier responsibility than when we are delegated to meet in this Assembly. The wisdom, the moderation, the mutual forbearance, the brotherly love and pure evangelical zeal, and may I not add, the order and decorum, which shall characterize this body, will have a great effect on the church's peace. On the contrary, if a spirit of resentment, if dissentions and personal feelings ever be permitted to enter into your deliberations and govern your decisions, the harmony of our churches will be at an end; the cause of truth will suffer; piety will languish; schism will abound; Zion will sit disconsolate in the dust, and all her friends will mourn; whilst her enemies will triumph, and their reproaches and blasphemies be multiplied.

The next thing, which I shall mention as being of importance to qualify us to promote the edification of the church, is *the gift of preaching*, and a disposition to exercise it with diligence. This is the chief

instrument which God has been pleased to select, both for the conversion and edification of his people: and although it may appear weak and even foolish to an unbelieving world, yet in all ages it has proved to be "the wisdom of God, and the power of God unto salvation, to all those who believe." As this is a highly important, so it is a very difficult work; and when we contemplate the nature and consequences of our undertaking, we have reason to cry out with trembling, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

I know of no employment in which the attainment of excellence is more difficult. Rules for our assistance have already been multiplied, and I feel no desire to add to their number. Indeed, rules of rhetoric never were of much service in forming a good preacher. They may correct some trivial mistakes of gesture or utterance, into which public speakers are apt to fall; but they cannot make an orator. And it is even doubtful, whether oratory itself, as an art, has been of much service to the church. We know that it is one of the most envied and admired attainments which a man can possess. A finished orator will attract numerous hearers; but his audience attend his preaching as they would a show or spectacle, merely for entertainment. The truths which he delivers are no further regarded by them, than as they furnish the speaker with an opportunity of being sublime or pathetic. Admiration is the only effect produced in the multitude, and the humble christian finds that to be entertained and pleased, and to be fed and edified, are very different things. Pulpit eloquence was never more cultivated, and

never attained greater perfection, than on the continent of Europe, in some periods of the last century; and yet no important effect seems to have been produced by these splendid exhibitions of oratory. Paul, although ranked with the first of orators by the first of critics, yet, disclaims all assistance from this art.

There is indeed a species of eloquence, which every man possesses, when he delivers any thing which deeply affects his own heart, which may be called the eloquence of nature; for it is the simple expression of our sentiments and passions, by such tones and gestures as are dictated by nature. It requires no study, is regulated by no rules of art. Those who think the least about oratory, and who are the farthest removed from any design of appearing eloquent, are the persons most likely to succeed in speaking naturally and impressively. Good speaking is more impeded by a too anxious desire to speak well, than by all other causes.*

If these sentiments be correct, the best method which we can pursue, will be to lose all attention to,

* The above remarks are not intended to refer to the *matter*, but only to the *manner* of discourse. It is believed that affectation, or an unnatural *manner* is the chief fault of most speakers. With respect to tones, looks, gesture, &c. the best rule is "to follow nature." No art, no rules can teach us how to express significantly and impressively the emotions and feelings of the heart. In all cases nature dictates the proper expression where the emotions are in real exercise; and every attempt to express feelings which do not exist must fail of success with the judicious hearer, and indicates such disingenuity as should never be found in a preacher of the gospel.

and concern about, the manner of our speaking, in the importance of the subjects on which it is our duty to discourse.

To preach the gospel as ambassadors of God to guilty men, to preach those awful truths which cannot be delivered without being attended with effects of the most momentous importance, to preach as those who must give an account of every one of our hearers, to preach as persons who are fearful every moment of being stained with the "blood of those who perish," to preach with the eternal torments of the damned, and the everlasting joys of heaven open to our view—this my brethren, is difficult—this is too much for mortal man!

It is hard to appear as public speakers, and feel no undue concern for our own reputation. However firmly we may resolve, when alone, to consult nothing but the glory of God and the salvation of men, yet we must be divinely assisted, or habitually self-mortified, to an uncommon degree, if we are not affected with too strong a desire for the applause of our hearers, or too keen an apprehension of their contempt.

But, when to please men is the chief object of the speaker, what a spectacle does he exhibit to superior beings! He speaks the truth, it may be, but his only concern is, that his discourse may be thought to be handsomely composed, or eloquently delivered. He considers not that in every word which he speaks, he is the dispenser of life or death.

Yet this undue anxiety to promote the idol self, does not in every case appear by an attention to ele-

gance of composition and eloquence in delivery; as it often shews itself in attempts to appear uncommonly warm and zealous in the cause of God; but the fervours of those who affect zeal are divested of all solemnity, and their discourse degenerates into rant and empty vociferation. Instead of the genuine feelings of the heart, there is stirred up a ferment of mere animal passions; and the speaker exhausts himself with incoherent declamation, which may produce some sympathy in the weak and ignorant, but which greatly disgusts the judicious.

But the greatest gifts will answer no end unless they are exercised. Of all men in the world we are under the strongest obligations to be diligent in our calling: in no profession does sloth rise to such a magnitude, in the catalogue of vices, as in ours.

We have undertaken an awfully important work, and wo be unto us if we preach not the gospel! We must be *instant in season* and *out of season*. For whilst we may be indulging our ease *souls are perishing;* yea perishing from under our ministry. Shall we then devote to amusements, to secular employments, or to unimportant studies, those precious moments, which if rightly improved might rescue some immortal souls from everlasting torments? God forbid. "In the morning let us sow our seed, and in the evening withhold not our hand, for we know not which will prosper, this or that."

The last important qualification which I shall mention, is *a spirit of prayer*. If the question were proposed, by what means shall Zion be raised from

the dust and become the joy of the whole earth? I would answer, by prayer. This is not peculiar to ministers of the gospel, but they should abound and excel in this heavenly gift. Although our profession leads us to be much conversant with religious subjects, and to engage in many religious duties, yet there are no christians who are in more danger of suffering the lively flame of devotion to languish, and to sink down into a state of awful declension and deadness than the preachers of the gospel. What the state of our intercourse with our God and Saviour is, what nearness of access to a throne of grace we enjoy from day to day, how much of a wrestling importunate spirit of prayer we possess, can be known only to God and our own consciences. But of this one thing we may be certain, that if we are deficient here, we are deficient every where else. If we have not confidence to speak to God as a father, how shall we deliver his messages to the people? The minister who approaches nearest to God in prayer, may be expected to be most successful in speaking to men; and perhaps one reason why many of us see our labours attended with so little fruit, is because we are so little in the habit of frequent, fervent, affectionate prayer. May God endue us all richly with those gifts and graces which will enable us effectually to promote the edification of the church!

And to his name shall be the glory. Amen.