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"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

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## Religious.

For the Christian Messenger.

### ASSOCIATIONAL SERMON,

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"The pillar and ground of the truth."—1 Timothy iii. 15.

The word "church" has various acceptations in the New Testament. Sometimes it means the entire body of the redeemed as it will have existed in all ages and in all countries: "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it." (Eph. v. 25). Sometimes it is employed in a more limited sense, indicating the servants of God at any one time living in the world. More generally, it is used to denote an assembly of christians accustomed to meet together for worship and service. Every such assembly is a church. So we read of the Church of God which is at Corinth—"the Church of the Thessalonians"—"the churches of Galatia." Then, as "the church," in the first sense, is the whole body of the redeemed, every christian church, rightly constituted, is a body of redeemed, renewed persons. Paul, exhorting the elders of the church at Ephesus to diligence and faithfulness in the discharge of their duties said, "Feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts xx. 28). The members of the Church at Rome were "beloved of God, called to be saints" (Rom. i. 7). All such members of churches, in apostolic times, professed "repentance towards God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ." It was understood and believed that they had been brought to God, in the belief of the truth. They were not all converted in the same way; for there is no stereotyped method of conversion, since God chooses to perform his great work by an infinite variety of methods. But they all professed to be saints." A true church is a society of "saints."

Now, it is God's ordinance that "every one who understands Christianity may teach it." A society of believers is a combination of the redeemed and renewed for the purpose of bringing others to the Saviour. Here, the principle of association is sanctified to the noblest ends. While individual obligation and responsibility are acknowledged in all earthly affairs, the organization of society is necessary to progress, sometimes even to existence. Men band together for mutual safety and advantage. So it is in religion. The grace of God, in its manifold workings, requires the existence of society. Its influences cannot be fully developed, nor its effect produced in any other way. And its objects must be carried forward by organized social arrangements. The various unfoldings of brotherly love and holy zeal for the salvation of souls necessitate the union of many for one definite object. That union is seen in the Christian church. God saves men; he employs the saved to save others. This holy process is carried on by means of the church, and by every church in which the true Christian principle is embodied. That is, the manifestation of God, through the truth, by the influence of the Spirit, is for the Church;—the working out, so as to accomplish the desired results, is in the church;—and the maintenance and extension of the truth must be by the church;—or, in other words, the church is the element in which, and the instrument by which God brings to pass his purposes of grace.

Such, generally, appears to be the meaning of our text. It is not necessary to enumerate or examine the different interpretations that have been proposed of the figurative phraseology here used. Imagine a pillar, firmly fixed on the floor of the building, at once sustaining and adorning it, and bearing inscriptions which announce the design of the founder in its erection. So is the Church of God—"the pillar and ground of the truth." This expression supplies the following topic of discourse; namely, THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS CONSTITUTED FOR THE PURPOSE OF EXHIBITING, MAINTAINING, AND PRESERVING GOD'S TRUTH IN THE WORLD.

How is this to be done?

I. BY ZEAL FOR THE TRUTH ITSELF.

The designs of God with reference to the salvation are carried on by the Holy Spirit; and the spirit works in men by means of the truth. Neither conversion, nor the formation of character, which is its result, nor happiness, nor holiness can be effected otherwise. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth" (James i. 18). "Sanctify them," our Lord prayed, "through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John xvii. 17). "True holiness" is "holiness of the truth" (Ephes. iv. 24; Alford). Error cannot convert the soul. Ceremonies and forms cannot convert the soul, although those who are attracted by them may put them in the place of piety, and so be deceived to their own destruction. Mere feeling cannot convert the soul: it is often mistaken for conversion, when that which is little better than animal sympathy is confounded with the work of the Holy Spirit, and the weak-minded and susceptible are persuaded that they have undergone that change without which no man can "see the kingdom of God," much less enter into it. It is through "belief of the truth" that the soul enjoys salvation. That truth is the doctrine of Christ;—what he is, in himself: what he is for us; what he is to us; and what we are to be, in and with him. From this, all gospel truth branches out; this is the centre to which all tends. Christ is "of God made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption;" and Christ crucified, as Paul teaches, is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. i. 24, 30).

No part of this divine system is unimportant or useless. No part can be spared. We must have Christ as he is, and a whole Christ;—Christ the Prophet of the Church, who by his Spirit teaches and guides: Christ the Priest, who in his own person made atonement, and now "ever liveth to make intercession for us" (Heb. vii. 25); Christ the King, the sole ruler of his people, from whom all laws emanate, whose will is supreme, and from whose decisions there is no appeal. In another mode of representation it is the doctrine of grace, in regard to which all professing christians exhibit a marked unity of thought and feeling:—grace is the origin,—the pure, uninfluenced love of God, "his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. i. 9); grace in the execution, through the finished work of the Redeemer, God's "unspeakable gift" to man; grace in the application and enjoyment, by the enlightening, renewing, sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit; grace in the completion, when those who are "called unto his eternal glory" (1 Peter v. 10) enter, by "abundant mercy," into the "inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" (1 Peter i. 4). On behalf of all these truths the Church of Christ is called to bear distinct, faithful, continuous testimony.

We do not plead for, or wish to impose, any merely human forms of expression. There may be identity of belief when the verbal representations considerably vary, as the style of the Puritan age differs from that of the present century. But the truth itself is essential, and must be guarded with jealous care. The "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) must be preserved unspotted and unmixed.

There is an unreasonable prejudice among many against "doctrines" or what they sometimes contemptuously call "dogma." But what are Christian "doctrines" or "dogmas"? Are they not the facts of the gospel considered in connection with their reasons and designs? What is election, but the fact that God "hath from the beginning chosen us to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. ii. 12)? What is justification? Is it not the act of God, who pardons and accepts the sinner for Christ's sake—the sinner who believes to the saving of the soul? And

what is the doctrine of the atonement but the announcement of the design of the death of the Saviour—the great fact of the redemption—the declaration that his blood was shed "for the remission of sins."

Now, these and all other doctrines are to be exhibited, maintained, and preserved by the Church. Her own health and life depend upon her faithfulness in this respect. Indifference or laxity cannot be compatible with soundness of state, but must be regarded as symptomatic of corruption, and sorely harmful to spiritual prosperity. "Buy the truth, and sell it not," was the admonition of the wise man [Prov. xxiii. 23]. In his Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians the Apostle showed the importance which he attached to the truths of the gospel, especially the doctrine of justification. Jude exhorts us to "build up ourselves on our most holy faith" [verse 20]. John denounces departure from the faith in the severest terms, and says, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed; for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." [2 John, 10, 11]

Be it our care, then, to watch against coldness of affection, or lessened interest in Christian doctrine. Let every one of our churches aim to be, in the spirit of our text "the pillar and ground of the truth." And let young converts be systematically instructed and trained, so that they may not be "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive," but may be "ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them, with meekness and fear." [Ephes. iv. 14: 1 Pet. iii. 15].

II. It is the duty of the Church to exhibit and maintain the truth by SPIRITUAL-MINDEDNESS.

By "spiritual-mindedness" we do not mean mere glib talking or luscious speech, which have been too often mistaken for indications of a spiritual state. "Spiritual-mindedness" is having the mind of Christ, the mind of the Spirit. Enoch was a spiritually-minded man; he "walked with God" [Gen. v. 24]. Barnabas was a man of spiritual mind—"a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith" [Acts xi. 24]. To be spiritually minded is to be "joined unto the Lord" [1 Cor. vi. 17]. It is the habitual recognition of the presence of God, deference to his authority in all things, constant endeavour to promote his glory. It is obedience to the apostolic exhortation, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" [1 Cor. x. 31]. Jesus referred to it when he said, "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" [Mat. vi. 33]. Paul describes it in impressive words:—"I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" [Gal. ii. 20]. These are all-pervading principles and holy habits. The men by whom they are exemplified, though they are "in the world," are not "of the world" [John xvii. 14-26]. They are "not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" [Rom. xii. 11]. When a church is composed, of such members, it is lively and strong; its prayer meetings, its social gatherings, the times when "they that fear the Lord speak often to one another" [Mal. iii. 16] are seasons of hallowed earnestness and fervour. The Heavenly Master is there, and the hearts of the disciples "burn within them" [Luke xxiv. 32]. The influence of such a society must be felt all around. The truth is commended to the neighbourhood; souls are won to Christ; and the gospel, presented to men in its own attractive, loveliness, becomes "the power of God unto salvation" [Rom. i. 16].

III. The Church is to exhibit and maintain the truth by BROTHERLY LOVE AND UNION.

Sin separates man from God, estranges man from man, and breeds universal selfishness. The unconverted are described as

"hateful and hating one another" [Titus iii. 3]. The apostle was compelled to say of certain professing christians who came under his observation—"All seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" [Phil. ii. 21]. How manifold and mischievous are the effects of the indulgence of a selfish spirit! How numerous, and often imperceptible, the gradations—from self-preference to meanness—and grasping—and petty fraud—and over-reaching—and avarice—and circumvention—and calumny—and malice—and open violence!

But when the grace of God takes possession of the soul, apostolic experience is attained:—"The love of Christ constraineth us: because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor. v. 14, 15). Believers "love as brethren:" they love one another "in the truth," and "for the truth's sake which dwelleth in them" (2 John 1, 2). Herein their likeness to the Lord Jesus appears: "Whosoever shall do the will of my father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mat. xii. 50)—and they can say, with Paul, "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity" (Ephes. vi. 24).

This spirit of brotherly love and union does not evaporate in blandness of expression, or the language of compliment and flattery. It is not loving "in word only." It is fully displayed when each seeks to "please his neighbour for his good to edification" (Rom. xv. 2), and all are active in promoting the general welfare of the body—"rejoicing with them that do rejoice, and weeping with them that weep" (Rom. xii. 15). A church composed of believers of such a stamp is a living commentary on the nineteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. Very much remains to be done, it is to be feared, before it can be said of the Christians of the nineteenth century, as was said in Tertullian's time, "See how those Christians love one another!"

IV. Truth must be exhibited and maintained in the Church, by obedience and consistency of deportment.

That was a remarkable testimony which was borne to the character of Demetrius, of whom the Apostle John said, "Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself" (3 John 32). The Philippians were exhorted to stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel (Phil. i. 27). Steadfastness and uniformity are here enjoined, and the meaning is, that a member of a christian church should be the same man everywhere; the same man in the street and in the store as in the church conference, so that it may be seen that he "abides in his calling with God," and that "the world is crucified unto him, and he unto the world" (1 Cor. vii. 24; Gal. vi. 14.)

Consecration to Christ must be the governing principle. "Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" Col. iii. 17). "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. xiv. 8). He whose life is described in these words in ever aiming to please the Saviour. He acts, in all his relations and engagements, "as over in his Great Taskmaster's eye."

If he is a student, he studies for Christ; if he is a farmer, he farms for Christ; if he is a merchant, he trades for Christ.—The avail of all his labour belongs to the Lord, to be appropriated in accordance with the spirit of the gospel, and the injunctions of the inspired word.

Jesus is "Master and Lord"—the only Lawgiver of the Church. He has instituted such ordinances as he deemed fit, and he has given us rules of life suited to all countries, all states, and all time. His will is to be reverently regarded. We have no power to alter, to add, or to omit. Strict obedience must be rendered, at all risks, and whatever may be the consequences