

Associational Sermon.

THE STEADFASTNESS OF THE CHURCH, THE EVIDENCE AND SUPPORT OF A LIVE MINISTRY.

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Thess. iii. 8. Now we live if ye stand fast in the Lord.

Were I asked to exhibit, from the records of the past, examples of a model minister and a model church, I think my mind would revert immediately to the Apostle Paul as the Minister, and the organized band of brethren and sisters at Thessalonica, in the first Century, as the Church. We cannot read the Acts of the Apostles, and especially that portion of the book that refers to the labors of St. Paul, and then read carefully his Epistles, without being convinced that he had a passion for souls. He was willing to make any sacrifice if he might be the means of saving men. Friends, home, country, fame, liberty, and even life itself, weighed nothing in his estimation against those imperishable interests bound up with man's future destiny. Neither was it his sole ambition to make converts to the new faith, he laboured to bring men to Christ, to make them christians, but he was scarcely less earnest in labor to make them eminent christians. For himself he was looking for an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of his Lord and Saviour, and he would be satisfied with nothing less for his brethren.

As his labors were largely evangelistic and consequently he could only visit the converts he had won and the churches he had established occasionally, he made up for the loss of his personal presence by those letters that have been gathered up with the imperishable records of Divine Inspiration, and stand as ever-enduring monuments to his zeal, not only for salvation of men, but to present them perfect in Christ Jesus. It has been truly said, Paul preached to make men christians; he wrote to make them eminent christians.

What was the character of this church at Thessalonica, we may learn from the letters of this Apostle addressed to that body. (Read especially the first chapter of his first Epistle.) I think none of the Pauline Epistles contains so little reproof, so much commendation, and never does our Apostle appear in better spirits than when writing them. Like a delighted father who lives to promote the best interests of his children, and who only feels that he lives to purpose when their welfare is secured. Now, being absent from them, he hears of their prosperity, and forgetting all his past cares and anxieties, all his labors and sufferings on their behalf, dips his pen in brightest color, and dashes off a sprightly letter, brimfull of parental counsel, affectionate sentiment and joyous thanksgiving. What thoughtful christian, be he minister or layman, can read these letters, without wishing for a multiplication of such ministers as the Apostle Paul and of such churches as that at Thessalonica.

Then would the ministry infuse its life and activity through all the membership of the church, and the church in turn would exert a healthful and invigorating reflex upon the ministry. The steadfastness of the church would be the best evidence of a vigorous ministry and the surest guarantee of a continuation of its vitality. "For now we live if ye stand fast in the Lord," or as Conybeare and Howson render this passage, "For now if you be steadfast in the Lord Jesus, I feel myself to live." This brings us to our theme, viz.:—*The Steadfastness of the Church, the evidence and support of a live ministry.*

What is a steadfast Church? The term sounds like a military one, and has in it the ring of that charge this same General delivered to another Division of the Lord's Army: "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, &c." It implies,

1st. A converted church. "In the Lord." This is not spoken to rebels but to those who have rendered submission of themselves to the service of their King. It implies,

2nd. A knowledge of their King's instructions. We cannot "stand fast in the Lord," without being well instructed in His word. A good understanding of the principles of warfare, lies at the foundation of a successful military career. So also a good understanding of the doctrines and principles of the Bible, the christian soldier's drill book, lies at the foundation of a suc-

cessful christian's or church's life. It implies,

3rd. Obedience to our Lord's commands. It means duty, work, conflict. "Then watch and fight and pray, &c." It implies,

4th. Submission to God's Method of training his soldiers, subjected as they are to fiery trials, they have to be trained full often in a fiery school, being called upon to face the bursting bombshells of the enemy, and listen to the roar of hell's artillery, they should be so disciplined as not to be turned aside by the fiercest fire of the foe. It implies,

5th. Not only submission to our leaders discipline, but also strict attention to that watch-care over one another which he enjoins upon the members of his church.—And by this I do not mean what enters into the popular idea of church discipline, viz.: a preferring of charges, a conviction of delinquents and expulsion of offenders, but the affectionate exercise of that watch-care over one another, which would, in all but exceptional cases preclude the necessity for extreme disciplinary measures.

The terms of the solemn covenant into which we entered when we became members of the church, express we think the scriptural idea of church discipline.—"Watching over one another in the love of God, reproving, rebuking and admonishing one another for good as occasion may require, &c." It implies,

6th. Lastly, a firm dependence and unflinching trust in the Almighty Spirit of God. A recognition of, and an acting upon the inspired declaration that "Paul was plant and Apollos water, but God giveth the increase."

Such a church, with a converted membership, well instructed in the doctrines and precepts of the Bible. Obedient under the Lord's commandments. Submission under the seemingly adverse dealings of Providence. Living in the daily practice of the new commandment, and reposing implicit confidence in the omnipotent Spirit, would answer, we think the Apostle's noble ideal of a church, expressed in the terms "Stand fast in the Lord." Now, moreover such a church would afford unquestionable evidence of a ministry thoroughly alive.

Under God it is well nigh indispensable to a thorough working steadfast church, that she should possess, not only an eloquent, educated, highly polished and popular ministry, for it is just possible to have that, and yet have a Leader devoid of real vitality, a mere whitened sepulchre, but one into whose soul that "Spirit that quickeneth" has entered and made his home, vitalizing all his powers and controlling all his words and actions.

God did not establish the ministry for mere ornament in the church, to hang like a parasite around her table, eating her bread and drawing nourishment from her breast, and make no return, but rather to feed her with the "sincere milk of the word" and the "strong meat" of the gospel, that she "may grow thereby."

The old adage, "like priest, like people," is not, as a rule, far from being correct. The relation between Pastor and Church is so intimate, that like a business co-partnership they will usually rise or fall together. I do not say that a vacillating worldly church affords in every instance an indisputable evidence of a lifeless ministry, but I do say that a dead church and a live ministry cannot remain long together. Either the icy arms of the church will freeze the life blood of the minister, or the warm life current in him will infuse vitality into the dead mass. But should neither of these results appear he will soon cry, "Oh! wretched man that I am let me be delivered from the body of this death," and shake the incubus off. But if we have live ministers we may be pretty certain, other things being equal, to having living steadfast churches. Because,

1. It is in accordance with God's purpose that it should be so.

The terms of the commission, and the promise appended I think, imply as much. "Go ye therefore and disciple all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

This charge was given to the ministry by the Head of the church. There is no intimation that there was even a possibility of failure, and the promise, "Lo, I am with you," &c., guarantees on Christ's part, the accomplishment of all that the terms specify. I am with you to make your ministrations effectual, for "my word shall not return unto me void." He does not send his servants to engage in a warfare at their charges, nor without ensuring their success.—The tearful sower, must be a joyful reaper.

He that goes in and out before his people in the fulness of the blessings of the gospel of Christ, will be sure to fill the lap of his church with the good things which he possesses, making them to "delight in the law of the Lord after the inward man," and strengthening them to "stand fast" in him.

The living minister will have a steadfast church.

2nd. Because the law of influence obtains here. A leading mind in any department will leave its impress on other minds.

The Philosopher, the Poet, the Man of Science, the Educationist, the Master Mechanic and the Scientific Farmer, will, each in his own particular sphere, exert a powerful influence on those with whom he mingles.

Go into any well-conducted mercantile establishment or into any of the prosperous factories springing up over this country, and mark the order and management. You see a place for everything, and everything in its place. There is no friction, no clashing and no confusion, you are favourably impressed with all you see, but with nothing more than the fact that meets you at every step, viz.: that a live man has control of the establishment. The same fact will impress you if you inspect the premises of any of our thrifty farmers.

Well then let any thoughtful intelligent christian visit, on a tour of inspection, a christian church, in town or country where he finds the plants in this garden of the Lord green and flourishing, the various means for the christian's growth in grace kept in vigorous operation; the prayer and conference meetings well sustained and interesting, the pointed earnest utterances of brethren and sisters giving abundant evidence, that these exercises are not engaged in merely to fill up the time. The monthly Missionary meeting, spiced with intelligence of what God is doing in the "regions beyond," stirring all hearts to take a deeper interest in the world's evangelization, moving to pray, not in unmeaning form, "Thy kingdom come," but with a holy earnestness; an earnestness that will stand even the trying test of the collection for missions taken at the close of the meeting. The Sabbath School with an able staff of teachers, men and women enthusiastically devoted to the religious training of the young, large adult Bible Classes, whence the supply of Teachers is kept up for the school proper, and for the establishment of Mission schools if required. In a word a church ready to every good work, and what, I ask, will be the irresistible conviction of his soul? Why that God is using a live man to engineer that church, one whose whole soul is on fire of love to God, whose burning enthusiasm in all christian work, must necessarily be contagious, and who from the depths of his soul can say, with Paul in the words of our text, "Now if ye be steadfast in the Lord Jesus, I feel myself to live."

3rd. But again, the steadfast church is an evidence of a live ministry, inasmuch as she depends largely upon its instrumentality for establishment in the faith. I have already remarked upon Paul's anxiety for the growth in grace of those who had been led to Christ by him. How earnestly did he ply every lawful means. How he strives to put them on their guard against every insidious foe. How careful to specify every part of the christian armor, and urge converts to be clothed with the whole Divine panoply. How faithfully he warns them against pride, worldly conformity and every hurtful lust. How he urges them to forget the things that are behind, and press towards the mark, to look to Jesus. In a word, how careful was he to instruct them in all the doctrines, precepts and promises which Christ and the Spirit had revealed to him, and none will deny that those instructions were necessary. Now, if so much laborious effort were called for on the part of an inspired Apostle for the establishment of early churches in the faith, is there any reason to doubt that a little instrumentality is needed now for the promotion of the same end, and that the same means used, the same faithfulness on the part of the ministry, the same dependence on the omnipotent Spirit would result in the same steadfastness in the faith that characterized the churches during the Apostle's ministry. We do not deny that facilities for religious training outside the ministry, have multiplied and are still multiplying. The full sweeping current of revelation is now flowing past our door, and all who will may stoop and quaff its refreshing waters.

The light and learning of centuries fall upon the sacred page to make its meaning more transparent, to rid it of false glosses and erroneous interpretations. Sabbath

Schools, Bible Classes and Church Bible Schools with all their paraphernalia of books and periodical literature, are springing up everywhere, not only as nurseries to increase the numbers of the church, but food to strengthen and fortifications to protect her from the assaults of the enemy. Systematic effort much needed and talked about is often with varied results attempted. Organizations built up largely out of the church, and yet distinct from the church, as Evangelical Alliances and Young Men's Christian Associations are assuming gigantic proportions. And yet with all these facilities for a religious education, I greatly fear that the advancement of the churches in christian knowledge, and their establishment in the faith are sadly out of proportion with the advantages possessed. The truth is, while agencies are multiplying to promote the christian's growth in grace, opposite agencies are also multiplying to prevent it. Satan seems more busy than ever in drawing his hellish vapours around the church to damp her ardor and secularize her energies. And it needs now as much as ever a living vigorous ministry, to, at once direct her numerous instrumentalities, and stem the rushing torrent setting in against her.

Let me notice, II. The steadfastness of the church the support of a live ministry.

If it be true, that the ministry acts directly upon the church, I think it is just as true that the church reacts upon the ministry. Christ's ambassadors, like others, obtain their new life from above, and like others, they must draw largely from the upper springs for its nourishment and support. They are also called to the exercise of their ministerial functions by the Head of the church. Yet it is nevertheless true that they look to a successful ministerial career for the support of their ministerial or official life. For

"Now we live" as ministers, "it ye" the churches we serve, "stand fast in the Lord." The mere hireling, whose own the sheep are not, who in his heart reverses the Apostle's declaration, and says, I seek not you but yours, will live all the same whether the church stand fast in the Lord or not, if she only stand fast by him, but the true servant of Jesus will only feel he lives, when the important mission with which he is entrusted is being successfully accomplished, one essential part of which mission is, the establishment of the churches in the faith and practice of the gospel. But let me be more particular.

1st. The steadfast church is the support of the minister, inasmuch as she gives the weight of her influence to his ministrations; without this the ministry would be almost a failure, one other great aim an end of the ministry is the conversion of sinners to God, but it requires little discernment to perceive, and but little experience to prove, that this end must be largely defeated if the church do not "stand fast in the Lord."

From the requirements of the gospel and the professions of its adherents, the world is enabled to make up quite an intelligent judgement of what christians ought to be, but if their lives are not an exemplification of the doctrines of the gospel, if their professions are contradicted by their deportment, then the onlooking world is not disposed to tarry long to argue as to the cause of the discrepancy between profession and practice, but will very generally lay the broad charge at the door of christianity itself. Sinners are hardened in their impenitency, the roots of infidelity strike down deeper into the prolific soil of the human heart, the ministry suffers defeat, the Ambassador of Christ weeps between the "Porch and the Altar, crying spare thy people, oh Lord and give not thine heritage to reproach." My brethren in the ministry will agree with me, when I say, that no subterfuge of the Devil is more successfully employed to render powerless our ministrations, and prevent us from living to purpose. The curled lip, the significant shake of the head and the triumphant interrogation, Where are your christians? are generally regarded by the worldling as a brazen shield against which the darts of earnest ministerial appeal may rattle, but which they cannot penetrate. But if the church stand fast in the Lord, all this is reversed. The tottering foundations upon which the objector stands is knocked down beneath him, his breastwork of excuses is demolished, his coat of mail is torn off, and without a shield, without a breastplate, without a helmet, without any armor whatever he stands before the battering-ram of truth; the Sword of the Spirit wielded by the servant of Jesus, whose arm is nerved by God himself, and who has at his back an invincible corps of his Lord's

Army, a steadfast church, an armed legion before which Hell itself stands aghast; and her haughty Chief must tremble. The shafts of truth directed by the Spirit, reach their destination, the citadel is successfully stormed, the Town of Mansoul is taken, and new life is infused into the minister of Christ while fresh triumphs crown his labours, and fresh trophies are won for his Master. But

2nd. The steadfast church, not only binds its silent influence to support the minister, but engages in active conflict with him.

He is not left to do all the work, nor is he expected to bear all the responsibilities. They do not engage him to do their praying or he take upon himself duties which properly belong to them. 'Tis his to take the oversight of the Flock, to feed them and lead them into green pastures and beside the still waters, not to graze in the one and lie idly by the other all the summer's day, but to be refreshed for labor to be strengthened for toil. 'Tis his, by constant study and earnest prayer to comprehend what the Master would have him and his people undertake, to lay his plans before them and invite their co-operation. 'Tis theirs to exercise their liberty of independent thought, to ask the Master's will too, and if they see in their Leader's plans and suggestions the beckoning hand of Jesus, to confer not with flesh and blood, but enter unhesitatingly, lovingly and joyfully into the work. If the ministry and the church were linked together and both identified with the common cause of christianity in the manner described, then we are fully convinced that the necessity for such extraneous organizations as before alluded to would never appear. And active, earnest ministers, or working, devoted members would never feel themselves impelled to seek in foreign Societies, the sympathy and co-operation in christian work, which they now alas, to often look for in vain in the church.

But the energies of the entire membership directed by a master mind, and all its sympathies enlisted would find sufficient scope for exercise under the folds of the glorious banner which she, in the name of her Lord has lifted up, and the minister encouraged by the activities of the church and strengthened by her steadfastness in the Lord Jesus, would triumphantly exclaim "Now we live."

3rd. Lastly, the steadfast church is the support of the minister, because it is attentive, appreciative, protective and generous. We group these items together for the sake of brevity, and being so nearly self evident they require little or no argument, yet every minister knows, by sad or joyful experience how important each of these particulars is, neither of them can be dispensed with, without detracting largely from his comfort and usefulness.

To have a church attentive to the ministrations of the word, anxious to know the Master's will that they may do it. Not mere fair weather christians, not troubled with Sunday Rheumatism. Not afraid of making a little sacrifice to be in their place in the sanctuary on the Sabbath day. Equally attentive to the social and business meetings of the church, ready to listen to the suggestions of the pastor or one another without carping, or finding fault, or being always on the lookout for innovations, and calling everything by that name that does not strictly accord with their own preconceived notion of things, or that happens to be a little out of the old beaten track of the Fathers. To have such a church I say, is a most enviable acquisition. Then the man of God feels that his labours are appreciated, that he does not spend his strength for naught.—His people need not tell him in so many words, that they highly appreciate him for his work's sake, there are other ways for him to ascertain that; though we by no means think, that the true minister of Jesus would be harmed or made proud, by expressions of appreciation even though they were less sparingly bestowed than is usually the case. By such a church too, the minister would be protected. He will be protected in preaching the truth. The church should no more be ashamed of the "gospel of Christ," than the Pastor. It is his duty to declare the "whole counsel of God." It is the church's duty not only to receive it, but to sustain the Pastor in proclaiming it. Taking this straightforward scriptural course, he will necessarily be obliged to say much that will probably be unpalatable to many hearers in a mixed congregation, though he say it not offensively or out of any love of controversy, but simply for the truth's sake. Many narrow-minded persons will be disposed to dispute his right to advance sentiments that