

For the Christian Messenger.

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Introductory Sermon,

PREACHED BEFORE THE CENTRAL BAPTIST ASSOCIATION AT GASPAREUX, MONDAY MORNING JUNE 15TH, 1868, BY REV. STEPHEN MARCH.

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." Ephesians vi. 10.

The inspired Apostle, has set forth in this epistle, with remarkable clearness, the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith; dwelling with characteristic delight upon those which relate to the sovereignty of God, and His eternal purposes of grace towards mankind,—His electing love,—His redeeming mercy,—His regenerating power,—and His preserving and sanctifying goodness. And here, also, the duties and privileges of the Christian life are delineated and enforced with matchless skill and precision. Not content with presenting a general view merely, of these duties, he enters into detail, and specifically shows their relation as well to the Church of Christ, as to the individual christian of every rank and station, in all the departments of social, domestic, and religious life. Nor has he failed in correctly estimating, on the one hand, the force of those temptations and difficulties with which christians are continually beset, by which their courage is liable to be weakened, and their energy destroyed; nor, on the other hand, that self-consciousness of unworthiness and insufficiency which is begotten in the soul in view of the magnitude, extent, and responsibility of the duties which are imposed. But taking these into full consideration, and adding thereto the strength, vigilance, and malignity of the forces of evil, the principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places, by which they are constantly assailed,—he seeks to rally them forward to the conflict. Lifting up his voice with the war cry on his lips, and with the bravery for which he is justly distinguished in his heart, he points them at once to *The source of their might*, and to *The pledge of their triumph*, exclaiming, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." Never did warrior display a greater courage, or a nobler heroism, as he urged on his gallant hosts to conquest against some deadly foe, than this "soldier of Jesus Christ" displays, as he leads out the hosts of the Lord's anointed against the more subtle, dangerous, and cruel enemies, who seek to impede their advance, hinder their usefulness, and destroy their peace; and never were words better adapted to arouse all the latent powers and energies of those to whom they are addressed, and to combine, harmonize, and direct their action, even under the most adverse circumstances.

And may we not, my brethren, invite you to an attentive consideration of this passage, and endeavor to elicit therefrom a few thoughts that may, by God's blessing, be rendered both interesting and profitable to us on the present occasion, assembled as we are this day, in solemn convocation, from the several localities and churches comprised within the limits of this Association and elsewhere? And may the Divine Spirit graciously assist us in our meditations; and enrich our souls with strength and wisdom for the duties and conflicts which lie before us.

Let us then, in the first place, briefly advert to the Apostolic injunction, and secondly, point out certain respects in which it is peculiarly applicable to ourselves.

I. The Apostolic Injunction, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord."

1st. It is interesting to observe that it is addressed to the "brethren." This expression suggests to us the fact that there is a close and intimate relation subsisting between all true believers in Christ Jesus; they are integral parts of one great family, recognizing and rejoicing in their heavenly Father's love, and cherishing towards each other the sympathies and affections which distinguish the closest and most sacred relations of domestic life. It was our Lord himself who said "One is your Master; even Christ, and all ye are brethren." And this relation was strikingly manifested by the early churches, and perhaps by none more so than by the church at Ephesus. Brotherly love exhibited itself in their intercourse with each other, in their mutual labors, prayers, and sacrifices for God's glory. Nor should this relation be lost sight of in our own time. It is highly important still, that those who are Christians should not fail to regard each other with peculiar tenderness, as comprising so many portions of God's redeemed household, nor be unmindful that in this relation each is on an equal footing with the other. Among christians there can be

no room for claims of superiority of rank, or station—no room for the exercise of priestly power, or that ambitious lust for distinction, so clearly seen in men of the world, who seek their portion in this life. Here each must sit down at the Master's feet, owning him Lord, and vowing only who best may augment his praise by humble, earnest, and self-denying efforts in his service. Here pride and passion must not enter, nor hate and strife find a place, but love and peace must shine and glow in every face and thrill and gladden every heart. It is the recognition of this delightful relation, which fills the hearts of God's people with joy, and forms a bond of union between the holy and blessed of every land and age,—between the church on earth and that in heaven.

2nd. It admonishes them as to the source of their strength. "Be strong in the Lord." From the beginning christians have been a feeble band, "a little flock," having neither secular power nor riches to distinguish them, or give weight either to their doctrines or practices. Under such circumstances it would not be surprising to find that opposition and persecution would tend to discourage them, and hinder them from making any great advance. But the Apostle here in effect reminds them, that weak as they are in themselves, they may have resort to a power that is invincible; one whose arm is omnipotent; whose love is unchangeable; whose grace is all-sufficient; whose mercy endureth for ever, and who is able to deliver them from all their foes. "He giveth power to the faint and to them that have no might He increaseth strength." He invests the poor of this world with "durable riches and righteousness, and out of weakness maketh His children strong, so that they wax valiant in fight, and put to flight the armies of the aliens." And he here most earnestly seeks to arouse them to place their trust in Him, and confiding in His faithfulness and power press forward in the work whereunto they were called.

3rd. This admonition implies that christians are nevertheless, liable to lose sight of the prime source of their strength; and to depend for success upon human agencies and instruments. This liability has manifested itself in all ages of the church's history. Forgetting that success and deliverance come alone from God, they have looked around for human safe-guards, and sought to entrench themselves behind worldly influences, and state authority; and by the aid of elaborate machinery and extensive operations to increase their numbers and their influence in the world. But my brethren "What fellowship hath light with darkness? and what unity can there be between the world and the church? or what concord between Christ and Belial? They are diametrically opposed the one to the other; and therefore cannot work harmoniously. Now let it not be imagined that we disparage or undervalue the use of means and instruments; far otherwise, we would have them abundantly employed, and would urge that they be of the best and most approved quality, that can possibly be obtained. But we must not forget that neither the welfare of the church nor the triumph of truth on the one hand; nor the overthrow of Satan's kingdom on the other, can be achieved by any human means or agencies alone, however powerful or effective in themselves. God himself declares "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." And let it be observed that whenever, and wherever this declaration has been lost sight of, and professed christians have depended upon their own efforts, or talents, or learning, or influence in the world; the church has speedily lapsed into either Ceremonialism or Rationalism. Her real force has abated, her moral energy has been destroyed. And the result has been that the crucifix has taken the place of the cross of Christ, and reason has usurped the throne of God Himself. The one has issued in Idolatry, and the other in Infidelity. The church has declined; her sun has become eclipsed; her glory has become tarnished; and the enemies of God and truth have for a season seemed to triumph. And so it must ever be when the creature is regarded as adequate to the accomplishment of that which the Creator alone can perform. In the face of this fact we see the force of the injunction of the text, "Be strong in the Lord."

4th. This language suggests that important benefits and results will follow a compliance with this admonition.

And is not this thought abundantly illustrated in the history of the church of Christ? Has it not been manifest that those who have grasped the idea of the Apostle, and have sought for strength alone from God, have been "strong" and have "done exploits"? "One has chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight." Indeed, all the marked epochs in her history are traceable to the firmness and fidelity with which she has clung to, and sought to execute the duty here imposed. The progress of evangelical piety, and the freedom of religious thought and action which at present obtains,—the enlightened and progressive spirit of the age,—and the rapid and glorious accessions that have, from time to time, been made to the company of believers, all show how powerful those become who look for success alone to God. A celebrated writer, beautifully remarks, that "God has appeared disposed to humble power, reserving triumphs for weakness. He has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and feeble things to confound the strong, vile things, and things despised, yea and things that are not to bring to nought the things that are." He has brought into competition riches and poverty, wisdom and ignorance, philosophy and rusticity, but poverty, rusticity, and ignorance, have conquered. From time to time He has called to His aid genius and power, and permitted them to operate in his work; but when He has so willed it, the sling of the young Son of Jesse

has sufficed to overthrow Goliath. The "smallness of the means has only served to enhance the power of Him who employed them. In all time the church has been sufficient for the church, truth has been sufficient for truth. Eloquence and enthusiasm have not done so much for this sacred cause, as the modest virtues, the uniform activity, and the patient prayers of thousands of believers whose names are unknown." These virtues, activity and prayers derived all their vitality from the fact that these believers were in union with their Lord; and were so many tokens of their recognition of, and participation in his "saving strength." And even those whose names come down to us laden with spiritual and holy fragrance from the chambers of ecclesiastical greatness, were men who derived their power and their success from looking constantly and earnestly to God as the author and fountain of all their usefulness, and the source of all their joy—men who had "power with God," and therefore "prevailed." Their greatness consisted less in their learning or their wealth, or their influential position in society, than in their faith in God, their confidence in Christ Jesus, their uniform reliance upon the Holy Spirit, and their frequent and constant communion with God in prayer. And my brethren, just in the proportion in which we possess their faith, and cherish their spirit of holy trust in the power, love, and faithfulness of God, will be the measure of our prosperity in securing these benefits and results, and in promoting the Kingdom of our Divine Saviour in the earth. Nothing but this will ensure it. Possessing this we shall be gladdened and encouraged by the presence of the Lord among us. It is His presence which perves the arm of the most humble disciple of Jesus to do and dare in his cause, this encourages his heart, and supports him when most inclined to depondency—this leads him triumphantly to bear the cross, and gloriously to achieve the conquest, and whilst under the full consciousness of his own personal weaknesses, helps him to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me."

"Strong in the Lord of Hosts,
And in His mighty power,
The man who in the Saviour trusts
Is more than conqueror."

Having noticed the Injunction let us now pass on to consider,

II. Certain respects in which we may regard it as peculiarly applicable to ourselves.

1st. We may regard it as applicable to us in relation to our faith. Let us "be strong" in our faith "in the Lord." It will be freely admitted that faith is an essential element in the christian character, without it the christian cannot exist,—without faith it is impossible to please God.—Now faith is a moral fact which takes place in man. It is founded in and rests upon Christ Jesus alone. When in exercise, for it is an operative principle, it serves to discover to the soul the most sublime spiritual truths, and furnishes the hand by which men seize the wonderful stories of spiritual treasure which are presented to them in the Gospel. It is the channel through which God communicates the choicest blessings of His grace, and is so effective and prevalent with God, that he will withhold nothing which it desires. It is most daring in its achievements, most blessed in its influences, and its effects are constant and enduring. It has wrought many a noble work for God; overcome the most insurmountable difficulties, dissolved innumerable doubts, vanquished its mightiest foes, and urged its way onward to the most glorious triumphs. It binds the soul to Jesus by indissoluble bands. Lifts its possessor up into fellowship with God, and avails itself of all the resources of His Providence, His infinite power, and His boundless love,—nay, it beholds all these in harmonious operation to further the interests of those whose hearts are influenced thereby. It reaches forward to the future, and prospectively sees all its desires fulfilled, its work accomplished, and man's glory begun. It bears him peacefully through a sea of troubles, a tempest of cares, and a world of toil and bitter disappointment to the regions of happiness and rest eternal. How eminently desirable then, it is that we possess and cherish it, until it shall become the ruling principle of our lives. Let us seek in a higher degree and in larger measure to be strong in faith, giving glory unto God.

"Faith is the polar star,
That guides the Christian's way,
Directs his wanderings from afar,
To realms of endless day;
It points the course where'er he roams,
And safely leads the pilgrim home,
It is the bright triumphal arch,
Through which the saints to glory march."

2nd. Consider it in respect to Doctrine. Let us "be strong" in the doctrine "of the Lord." It is one of our distinctive peculiarities as a denomination, that in matters of faith, we can recognize no authority as binding upon the conscience, other than that of Christ, and his inspired Apostles, as revealed in the Divine Word and interpreted under the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit, concerning whom our Lord said, "He shall guide you into all truth," for "he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you." In support of this principle our predecessors have stood forth as the most earnest advocates, the most unwavering and self-abnegating defenders. To maintain it they have encountered the fiercest opposition, the most malignant hatred, the most cruel and tortuous imprisonments; and the hottest fires of persecution have been kindled to destroy their writings, their influence, and their lives. But, thank God, Baptists still survive, and by the power and tenacity with which they adhere to, and propagate this principle, are at this hour, making themselves felt in all ranks of society

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throughout Christendom. And my brethren let us emulate the noble example of those who have preceded us; from the maintenance of this principle let us never swerve, nor be betrayed into any, even the least departure from the teachings of our Great "Head," our only "Law giver." But whatever He has tauht, let us hold fast firmly, rigidly, unmoved by any influence either from without, or from within. Nor let us manifest our weakness, or our folly, by endeavoring to be wise above that which is written; and thus lay ourselves open to the charge of "adding to" God's word. But evermore let us be strong in our determination to stand up for truth and righteousness, true to our real mission, let us continue to fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, in whatever forms they may assail us; and "whenever the first sanctions practices, the second indulgences, and the third tendencies which are contrary to revealed truth, and to Christ's gospel, let no pusillanimous alarms about bigotry and intolerance tempt us to a vile neutrality, or a base indifference. Truth can be uncharitable only to falsehood; and principle intolerant only into expediency, and therefore in denouncing what Christ hath condemned, and upholding what the Divine Word hath proclaimed, there can be no real uncharitableness towards men. On the contrary, the truly uncharitable are those who leave men to perish in their sins rather than risk offending their pride. Against this heartless compromise of truth and principle, for the sake of a false charity, and a fictitious liberalism, God and nature, reason and revelation loudly and perpetually exclaim." The doctrine of Christ is as immutable as himself, and is consequently designed to influence the conduct, and the lives of His followers, throughout all time. Founded upon this, they will be proof against every assault, and adequate to stand the most trying ordeal, and come forth "as gold seven times purified." Cherishing this, our faith will increase, and our works will abound. Thus shall we now fully comprehend its meaning, realize its sublimity and rejoice in its sufficiency. And just so far as this doctrine is illustrated in our lives, enforced by our instructions, and becomes the basis of our action, in all our relations, will men be led to see and feel its vast importance, and be constrained "to believe being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord."

"His doctrine is almighty love,
There's virtue in His name
To turn the raven to a dove,
The lion to a lamb."

3rd. We may consider this injunction as applicable to ourselves in relation to the cultivation and maintenance of Holiness of character and life. Holiness, as concerns its dignity, is a theme which descends from the loftiest pinnacle of uncreated perfection, down to the utmost limit of finite reason, and conscious responsibility. It is this indeed, which constitutes the moral beauty of Jehovah; the very atmosphere of the celestial home, the shining apparel of the angels, the glory of martyrs, the un fading crown of departed saints, the real harmony of the world, and the final bliss of the universe.—Hence its paramount importance. Jehovah saith to his people, "Be ye holy, for I am holy." "Ye are a holy nation." "Without holiness no man can see the Lord." Holiness, then, we regard as an indispensable characteristic of a renewed soul, and hence it is that the church of Christ, which is composed of those who have been "renewed in the spirit of their mind," is designated in Scripture a community of "saints." This distinguishes the church from the world; this assimilates men to the image of their Creator; this prepares them, for the ultimate enjoyment of His presence in eternal glory. And even here, neither the church, nor the individual christian, can be either happy or useful without it. In its absence neither can exert any influence on the side of God and truth.—We go further, and most emphatically declare, that in its absence, neither have any existence at all. It is absolutely essential that those who profess to be christians should be "unspotted from the world." Regeneration! what is it but the germ of the spirit of holiness, the "incorruptible seed" of piety deposited by the Holy Spirit in the human soul. Baptism! what is it but the outward manifestation or symbol of the existence of this heavenly principle, by which the believer indicates that he is "dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord," and by which he further declares his willingness and purpose henceforth to "walk in newness of life,"—a life of holiness. The Lord's Supper! what is it? Primarily it is a setting forth in symbolic form of the Lord's death until he come, but it is not also at least incidentally and inferentially a fraternal recognition of the sweet and hallowed union which subsists between "The Holy One," and those whom His mercy and grace have called, "that they should be holy, and without blame before him in love?" Nothing, therefore, can excuse us from seeking after it, and endeavoring to maintain it in all its loveliness and power. "While we may be neither wise nor eloquent, nor rapt by religious ecstasy to the third heavens, we must be holy; and that is the vocation of every believing soul, and the design of God in respect to each one of us. This holiness proportioned to our measure, and adapted to a sphere of activity which does not transcend our own, attracts us by its simplicity while it charms us by its beauty. Mysterious in its origin, wonderful in its nature, nay, miraculous, if we consider the changes it produces, but not the less human, attainable, and practicable, it is the prose of the kingdom of heaven which each is bound to speak." Nor must we from any considerations tolerate or sanction, either in ourselves, or in those associated with us, anything of an opposite tendency.

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