

WRITINGS

OF THE REV.

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A

MOST WHOLESOME COUNSEL

How to behave ourselves in the midst of this wicked generation, touching the daily exercise of God's most holy and sacred word.

BY JOHN KNOX.

1556.

IN 1556, Knox, who was then in Scotland, received letters from the church of English exiles at Geneva, which stated that they had appointed him to be one of their ministers. He considered it to be his duty to accede to their request, and in July proceeded thither. Previously to his leaving Scotland he gave his brethren such directions as he considered suitable to their circumstances at that time, and wrote the following letter to be circulated amongst such as had heard his preaching.

The state of the protestants in Scotland at that period was very similar to their situation in England, which is thus described by Strype, in his Memorials of the reign of queen Mary:—"When the learned preachers and ministers were most of them burnt or fled, and the flocks left destitute of their faithful pastors, some of the laity, tradesmen, or others, endued with parts and some learning, used in that distress to read the scriptures to the rest in their meetings, and the letters of the martyrs and prisoners, and other good books; also to pray with them, and exhort them to stand fast, and to establish them in the confession of Christ to the death. Such a one was that excellent pious man and confessor, John Careless, who was a weaver of Coventry; and Clement, a wheelwright, who, speaking of the warnings of the preachers that were then dead and had confirmed their sayings with their blood, said thus of himself;—"myself, when I was with you, did with my simple learning and knowledge, the best I could, to call you from those things that will surely bring the wrath of God upon you, except ye repent in time, and turn to the Lord with your whole heart; but how the preachers' warnings and my poor admonitions have been and are regarded, God and you do know" Vol. iii. p. 364.

In another place, Strype says, "The course they took in these sad times was the same which the primitive Christians did, when they were under their persecutions, namely, prayers and tears. They continued to assemble together even in the hottest times, and in these assemblies sometimes they only prayed together." Vol. iii. p. 245.

MOST WHOLESOME COUNSEL.

To his brethren in Scotland, after he had been quiet among them.

The comfort of the Holy Ghost for salutation.

NOT so much to instruct you, as to leave with you, dearly beloved brethren, some testimony of my love, I have thought good to communicate with you, in these few lines, my weak counsel, how I would ye should behave yourselves in the midst of this wicked generation, touching the exercise of God's most holy and sacred word, without which neither shall knowledge increase, godliness appear, nor fervency continue among you. For as the word of God is the beginning of spiritual life, without which all flesh is dead in God's presence; and as it is the lantern to our feet, without the brightness whereof all the posterity of Adam walk in darkness; and as it is the foundation of faith, without which no man understands the good will of God, so it is also the only organ and instrument which God uses to strengthen the weak, to comfort the afflicted, to reduce to mercy by repentance such as have slidden, and, finally, to preserve and keep the very life of the soul in all assaults and temptations. Therefore, if that ye desire your knowledge to be increased, your faith to be confirmed, your consciences to be quieted and comforted, or, finally, your soul to be preserved in life, let your exercise be frequent in the law of your Lord God. Despise not that precept which Moses, who, by his own experience, had learned what comfort lies hid within the word of God, gave to the Israelites, saying, "These words which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt exercise thy children in them; thou shalt talk of them when thou art at home in thy house, and as thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up; and thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be papers of remembrance between thy eyes; and thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and upon thy gates." And Moses, in another place, commands them to remember the law of the Lord God, to do it, that it may be well with them, and with their children in the land which the Lord shall give them. Meaning that as frequent memory and repetition of God's precepts is the means whereby the fear of God, which is the beginning of all wisdom and felicity, is kept recent in mind; so is negligence and oblivion of God's benefits received, the first evidence of defection from God.

Now, if the law, which, by reason of our weakness, can work nothing but wrath and anger, was so effectual that, being remembered and rehearsed of

purpose to do it, it brought to the people a corporeal benediction; what shall we say that the glorious gospel of Christ Jesus doth work, so that it be with reverence entreated? St. Paul calls it the sweet odour of life unto those that should receive life, borrowing his similitude from odoriferous herbs or precious ointments, whose nature is, the more they are touched or moved, to send forth their odour more pleasing and delectable. Even such, dear brethren, is the blessed gospel of our Lord Jesus; for the more it is treated of, the more comfortable and more pleasant is it to such as do hear, read, and exercise the same. I am not ignorant that as the Israelites loathed the manna, because that every day they saw and ate but one thing, so some there are now-a-days, who will not be holden of the worst sort, that, after once reading some parcels of the scripture, do turn themselves altogether to profane authors and human letters, because that the variety of matters therein contained brings with it a daily delectation, where contrariwise, within the simple scriptures of God, the perpetual repetition of a thing is fascheous [tiresome] and wearisome. This temptation, I confess, may enter into God's very elect for a time, but it is impossible that they continue therein to the end; for God's election, besides other evident signs, hath this ever joined with it, that God's elect are called from ignorance, (I speak of those that are come to the years of knowledge,) to some taste and feeling of God's mercy, of which they are never satisfied in this life, but from time to time they hunger to eat the bread that descended from heaven, and they thirst to drink the water that springeth unto life everlasting, which they cannot do but by the means of faith, and faith looks ever to the will of God revealed by his word. So that faith hath both her beginning and continuance by the word of God; and so I say that it is impossible that God's chosen children can despise or reject the word of their salvation for any long continuance, neither yet loath it to the end.

Often it is that God's elect are holden in such bondage and thralldom, that they cannot have the bread of life broken unto them, neither yet liberty to exercise themselves in God's holy word; but then God's dear children do not loath, but most greedily do they covet, the food of their souls. Then do they accuse their former negligence, then they lament and bewail the miserable affliction of their brethren, and then they cry and call in their hearts, and openly where they dare, for free passage to the gospel. This hunger and thirst doth argue and prove the life of their souls. But if such men as having liberty to read and exercise themselves on God's holy scripture, yet begin to weary because from time to time they read but the same thing; I ask why weary they not also every day to drink wine, to eat bread, every day to behold the brightness of the sun; and so to use the rest of God's creatures, which every day do keep their own substance, course, and nature? They shall answer, I trust, because such creatures have a strength, as oft as they are used, to expel

hunger, and quench thirst, to restore strength, and to preserve life. Oh miserable wretches, who dare attribute more power and strength to the corruptible creatures, in nourishing and preserving the mortal carcass, than to the eternal word of God in nourishment of the soul which is immortal! To reason with their abominable unthankfulness at the present it is not my purpose. But to you, dear brethren, I write my knowledge, and do speak my conscience, that so necessary as meat and drink are to the preservation of bodily life, and so necessary as the heat and brightness of the sun are to the quickening of the herbs, and to expel darkness, so necessary also to life everlasting, and to the illumination and light of the soul, are the perpetual meditation, exercise, and use of God's holy word.

And therefore, dear brethren, if ye look for a life to come, of necessity it is that you exercise yourselves in the book of the Lord your God. Let no day slip over without some comfort received from the mouth of God. Open your ears, and he will ever speak pleasing things to your heart. Close not your eyes, but diligently let them behold what portion of substance is left you within your Father's testament. Let your tongues learn to praise the gracious goodness of Him, who, of his mere mercy, hath called you from darkness to light, and from death to life; neither yet may ye do this so quietly that ye will admit no witnesses. Nay, brethren, ye are ordained of God to rule and govern your own houses in his true fear, and according to his holy word. Within your houses, I say, in some cases ye are bishops and kings; your wives, children, and family are your bishopric and charge; of you it shall be required how carefully and diligently you have instructed them in God's true knowledge, how you have studied to plant virtue in them, and to repress vice. And therefore I say, you must make them partakers in reading, exhortation, and in making common prayers, which I would in every house were used once a day at least. But above all things, dear brethren, study to practise in life that which the Lord commands, and then be ye assured that ye shall never hear nor read the same without fruit. And this much for the exercises within your houses.

Considering that St. Paul calls the congregation the body of Christ, whereof every one of us is a member, teaching us thereby that no member is of sufficiency to sustain and feed himself without the help and support of any other; I think it necessary that for the conference of scripture, assemblies of brethren be had; the order therein to be observed is expressed by St. Paul, and, therefore, I need not to use many words in that behalf, only willing, that when ye convene, which I would were once a week, your beginning should be by confessing of your offences, and invocation of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus to assist you in all your godly enterprises. Then let some place of scripture be plainly and distinctly read, so much as shall be thought sufficient for the day or time; which ended, if any brother have exhortation,

interpretation, or doubt, let him not fear to speak and move the same, so that he do it with moderation, either to edify or be edified; and hereof I doubt not but that great profit shall shortly ensue. For, first, by hearing, reading, and conferring the scriptures in the assembly, the whole body of the scriptures of God shall become familiar, the judgment and spirits of men shall be tried, their patience and modesty shall be known; and, finally, their gifts and utterance shall appear. Multiplication of words, perplexed interpretations, and wilfulness in reasoning, are to be avoided at all times, and in all places, but chiefly in the congregation, where nothing ought to be respected except the glory of God and comfort and edification of our brethren.

If any thing occur within the text, or yet arise in reasoning, which your judgments cannot resolve, or capacities apprehend, let the same be noted and put in writing before you depart the congregation, that when God shall offer unto you any interpreter, your doubts being noted and known, may have the more expeditious resolution; or else that when ye shall have occasion to write to such as with whom ye would communicate your judgments, your letters may signify and declare your unfeigned desire that ye have of God and of his true knowledge; and they, I doubt not, according to their talents, will endeavour and will bestow their faithful labours to satisfy your godly petitions. Of myself I will speak as I think; I will more gladly spend fifteen hours in communicating my judgment with you, in explaining as God pleases to open to me any place of scripture, than half an hour in any other matter beside.

Further, in reading the scriptures I would ye should join some books of the old and some of the new testament together, as Genesis and one of the evangelists, Exodus with another, and so forth; ever ending such books as ye begin, as the time will suffer; for it shall greatly comfort you to hear that harmony and well-tuned song of the Holy Spirit speaking in our fathers from the beginning. It shall confirm you in these dangerous and perilous days to behold the face of Christ Jesus, and his loving spouse and church, from Abel to himself, and from himself to this day, in all ages to be one. Be frequent in the prophets and in the epistles of St. Paul, for the multitude of matters therein contained require exercise and good memory. Like as your assemblies ought to begin with confession and invocation of God's Holy Spirit, so would I that they were never finished without thanksgiving and common prayers for princes, rulers, and magistrates; for the liberty and free passage of Christ's gospel; for the comfort and deliverance of our afflicted brethren in all places now persecuted, but most cruelly within the realm of France and England; and for such other things as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus shall teach unto you to be profitable, either to yourselves or yet to your brethren wheresoever they are.

If thus or better, dear brethren, I shall hear that ye exercise yourselves, then will I praise God for your great obedience, as for them that not only have received the word of grace with gladness, but that also, with care and diligence, do keep the same as a treasure and most precious jewel. And because I cannot expect you will do the contrary at the present, I will use no threatenings, for my good hope is, that ye shall walk as the sons of light in the midst of this wicked generation; that ye shall be as stars in the night season, which yet are not changed into darkness; that ye shall be as wheat amongst the cockle, and yet that he shall not change your nature which ye have received by grace, through the fellowship and participation which we have with the Lord Jesus in his body and blood. And, finally, that ye shall be of the number of the prudent virgins, daily renewing your lamps with oil, as they that patiently abide the glorious appearance and coming of the Lord Jesus, whose omnipotent Spirit rule and instruct, illuminate and comfort your hearts and minds, in all assaults, now and ever. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus rest with you.

Remember my weakness in your daily prayers.

Your brother unfeigned,

JOHN KNOX.

The 7th of July, 1556.