

*Presbyterial Exercise Addition, June 24, 1708.*

MINISTERS TO CONTINUE TILL THE CHURCH BE PERFECT.

SERMON XXI.

EPHESIANS iv. 13,

*Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*

DOCTRINE I. That the office and work of the ministry is to continue till all the elect of God be fully perfected, and the church arrive at its full growth. This is the principal doctrine of the text. We shall first confirm this doctrine, and then give the reasons of it.

I. To confirm the truth of this, consider,

1. That Christ's presence is promised to the ministry always, even to the end of the world, Matth. xxviii. 20; now this supposeth the existence of the ministry till then. Ministers are the stars which Christ holdeth in his right hand, that will always shine more or less while the stars are in the firmament; and wicked men may as well attempt the divesting of the heavens of these glorious lights, as the church of Christ of a ministry, for they shall never be able to effect the one any more than the other. Even when the church is into the wilderness, some are commanded to feed her there.

2. The sacraments are to continue till then, and consequently a ministry by which they may be dispensed. As to baptism, it is plain from that, Matth. xxviii. 20. Though the blasphemous Socinians account it only a temporary right, used by the apostles towards those, whether Jews or Gentiles, of whom the gospel church was first made up. But there is a command universal in respect of persons to be baptized; in respect of places, and in respect of times, to the end of the world. As circumcision lasted in the church till Christ's first coming, so must baptism till he come again. And as for the sacrament of the supper, it must continue till the Lord come again. For by it we do shew the Lord's death till he come.

3. The Scripture holds forth public ordinances, in which the Lord keeps communion with his people, never to be laid aside till they come to glory. It is one of the singularities of the upper house, that there is no temple there, Rev. xxi. 22. Here they look through the lattices of ordinances, till they come to see face to face in heaven. It is when the day of glory breaks, that these shadows

will flee away; but till that time, Christ has promised to be in the mountain of myrrh—the public ordinances; so called in allusion to the temple, which was on a mountain.

II. Reasons of the doctrine. It must continue.

1. Because the ministry is a mean of the salvation of the elect. “It hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe.” They are these by whom the Lord gathers his elect; the means must continue till the end be obtained, Rom. x. 14, 15. While there is a lost sinner to seek, the Lord will not blow out the candle; and while the night remains, and till the sun arise, these less lights are necessary to be continued in the church.

2. The ministry is appointed of Christ, in some measure to supply the want of his bodily presence in the world. He spoke in the prophets before he came, as the word is, Heb. i. 1; yea to the old world, by his Spirit in Noah a preacher of righteousness, he preached. Now when he is ascended up on high, he hath given a ministry; and now God doth beseech sinners by them; and in Christ’s stead, we pray sinners to be reconciled to God. They must then continue till the Lord come again.

3. Because their work which they have to do, will continue till then. They are ambassadors for Christ, and while he has a peace to negotiate with sinners, he will still employ his ambassadors. While Christ keeps house in the lower world, stewards must be maintained to give his servants meat in due season. While weeds grow in the vineyard, the labourers must be continued; and till the house be fully built, and every stone laid in the building, it is not time to dismiss the builders.

4. What society can be preserved without government and governors. Every society hath its governors, and so the church must have hers also. While corruption remains in church members, there will be out-breakings among them. That company that is terrible as an army with banners, how mean would it be if there were not a set of men appointed by the Lord to order and govern them; they would soon turn into a mass of confusion. In the best constituted church how often is the beauty of it marred; how often does the enemy break in, though the watchmen keep their posts, and stand to give warning to the city; how much more, if there were no watchmen at all. These then must be continued, till they all be within the gates of that city, where the gates are never shut, because no enemy can make an attempt to break in, and these that are within have no inclination to go out.

USE 1. Of information. It lets us see that the church shall never fail altogether. The continuance of the ministry argues the con-

tinuance of the church. When the Lord has done his work, he will doubtless call in his servants, and will not have watchmen where there is no city to watch. The church and her ministry also, may be driven into the wilderness, and they may both be reduced to a very small number, but neither of them shall altogether fail. There may be seven thousand in Israel, when Elias thinks he is left alone; and the witnesses of the truth may be seen so far gone as if they were dead, and yet there are still some in the darkest time, who afterwards appear as if they had risen from the dead.

Again, this shews that Christ hath a special care of, and providence watching over the ministry. Ministers are the great butt of the world's malice, the thorns in their eyes of which they would fain be freed; and readily, when a storm ariseth, it blows most violently on their faces. Papists cry for miracles; if they were not blinded, they might see it in the continual preservation of these earthen vessels, for all the opposition they meet with in the world. But Christ holds the stars in his right hand.

We see also the dignity of the office. The greatest officers in earthly kingdoms, yea kings themselves, hold not their offices by such a tenor. Their work is to carry on God's work in the church till the church be perfected, a noble work, and a long term indeed for the continuance of their office; which is never to cease till God be all in all, and all the elect be in heaven.

Wo then to those that are above teaching, and despise the ministry as that which they might well want. Has Christ set a ministry in the church as an useless burden upon the people. It speaks a profane spirit, and a growth indeed, but not towards that in the text; a growth in wickedness and self-conceit. Let us therefore prize the preaching of the word.

DOCTRINE II. The diversity of gifts bestowed on ministers hath a tendency to, and is designed for advancing of unity among God's elect people, for unity is the centre of all these divers gifts. These are as the strings of a viol, some sounding higher, others lower; yet altogether making a pleasing harmony. "Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion." There are many things necessary to make a compact building, such as the church is. Some must procure the stones, some lay them; some smooth and join the wood, and altogether make a compact uniform house. Round about the throne are the four beasts; some eminent for lion-like boldness; some for the patience and laboriousness of the ox; some for prudence, and some for quick-sightedness in the

mysteries of godliness. The church can want none of them. "The eye cannot say to the foot I have no need of thee." Some brought blue, purple, scarlet, goat's hair, to the tabernacle. Some of these things were more necessary than others, but none of them could be wanted. All our Lord's gifts to his servants, tend to unite his servants with God, and among themselves, by faith and love.

USE 1. For information. This lets us see what a desirable thing unity in the Lord is. It is that which is the great end of all these divers gifts that Christ has bestowed. It is comely in the eyes of the Lord, and so should it be in ours. By Adam's fall his whole posterity were broken and shattered, rent from God and from one another. To cure this, God has appointed Christ a new head, under whom they might all meet again in unity; and Christ has appointed ministers adorned with a diversity of gifts, in order to accomplish this.

2. It may also let us see what is that government of the church that looks most like divine institution; whether prelaacy that gives the keys unto one, or presbytery that gives them to the unity of ruling church officers. Which of them is most adapted to the end of the ministry; whether one gift, or diversity of gifts. The text determines the question, and consequently determines that several presbyteries diversely gifted, are the subjects of church power, and not a single prelate. Prelaacy looks nothing like Christ's economy, and his way of managing his house; therefore prelaacy brought in for the remedy of schism, was a step very far out of Christ's way. And this church was for many years preserved from heresy and schism also, by means of presbyterian government; and though of late our schisms have increased, it remains still, that it is the government most adapted to unity, according to the Scriptures.

USE 2. Of reproof. It reproves those people who make the divers gifts of ministers occasions of schism and faction. "One saying I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos." It is a great weakness that people cannot value one gift, but they must undervalue another. Many cannot build up one in their esteem, but they must needs have the ruins of others for a foundation for it. How contradictory are their desires, to what Christ would have in the church. Christ would have diverse gifts, and they would have but one, and that all might be just of a piece with what they fancy. These that say they can get no good of such and such a gift, had need to take heed, that when they get good, it be not rather a tickling of their fancy, than solid edification.

But much more are these ministers to be reprov'd, who improve their gifts to the rending of the church, and breeding in people a

contempt of others. "Some, indeed, preach Christ, even of envy and strife: and some also of good will. The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds." This is a dreadful perverting of the end of these gifts, and says that such are devoted more to their own honour than to the good of souls.

DOCTRINE III. Whatever differences are now among the godly, yet a perfect unity is abiding them, in which they shall all have the same apprehensions and views of spiritual things. To confirm this, consider,

1. The perfect unity of the elect of God, is that which is purchased by the blood of Christ, and therefore must needs take effect. He died, "that he might gather together in one, the children of God that were scattered abroad." Sin has built up a partition wall betwixt God and the elect, as well as others, and a partition dividing them among themselves. The sufferings of Christ, hath meritoriously thrown it down; upon which it must needs follow, that it will be actually thrown down by the Spirit of Christ beginning the work here, and afterwards perfecting it.

2. This unity is prayed for, by the great Mediator, whom the Father heareth always, and whose intercession must needs be effectual, John xvii. 21—23. He came into the world, to make up that rent which sin had made; and he is now at the Father's right hand pursuing the same design, never to leave it till it be perfected.

3. The same Spirit dwells in the head and in all the members, though not in the same measure; the same ointment poured on the high priest's own head, runs down to the skirts of his garments, and anoints all the members of Christ. Hence the apostle presseth unity from the fellowship of the Spirit, they being joint partakers of the one Spirit of God, Phil. ii. 1, 2. This Spirit hath begun that union, and is still at the uniting work; and it consists not with the honour of God, not to perfect that which he hath begun. For which cause the church may confidently say as David, "The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands."

4. The occasion of the disordant judgments that are among the people of God, will at length be taken away. There is great darkness now, in those that have the greatest share of light and knowledge. The time we are in this world, is a night in comparison of the day of eternity that is approaching. No wonder we have every one our own mistakes; but where we are going, there is no night there. Now the most knowing, know but in part; but that which

is perfect will come, and then that which is in part will be done away. Now we are but children, and therefore want not our childish conceptions of heavenly things; but when we come to a perfect man, these childish things will be put away. Now we see but through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now we know but in part, but then shall know as we are known, most clearly and distinctly, as it is said, 1 Cor. xiii. 9—12. So truth being but one, our conceptions of it will be the same, when we shall be perfectly cast into the mould of truth.

USE 1. This lets us see that the people of God will at length arrive at unity of affections, lay aside all their jarrings, animosities, factions and divisions, and cordially embrace each other in the arms of perfect love. For the fountain being stopped, the streams must needs become dry; difference of judgment being that which occasions such discord and alienation of affections. This may comfort the godly, oppressed now with grief, because of these differences that are among the Lord's people.

2. It may let us see the odious nature of divisions and discords among professors. These tell us we are yet abroad, not at home. They look like the earth, and very unlike heaven. "Therefore," says Paul, "while one saith I am of Paul, and another I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal." When we are better Christians, we will be more peaceable, and leave off to devour one another were we once in the ark above.

USE 2. Of exhortation. This serves to urge us to several duties.

1. To labour for unity, and "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." "It is a pleasant thing for brethren to dwell in unity. It makes the church strong and terrible to enemies; whereas divisions do exceedingly weaken her, and make her a prey to the enemy. Blessed be the Lord for that unity which is yet among the ministers of this church; and long may it last, for be it broken when it will, the success of the gospel which is little now, will be less then. Men will be readily converted to a party, but few will be converted to Christ.

2. Let us bear with one another in love; knowing we are yet in the body, and have need of compassion. Let us pursue the quarrel against an ungodly world, enemies to God and godliness, because there is no hope of meeting in heaven to compose the difference; but see we any with their faces towards the heavenly Canaan, O let us not fall out by the way.

3. Let us long for heaven as the place where we will be happy. For motive hereto, consider,

DOCTRINE. IV. That the church of Christ shall at length arrive

at its full growth in glory, as a man come to perfect age. Then shall it be perfect in parts, every member being brought in, and in degrees every member being at its full growth. How does the heir long till the time of his minority be overpast, that he may get the inheritance in his hands. There is an eternal weight of glory abiding a state of perfection, when we shall know no more clouds of darkness and ignorance, no more weakness; but the weakest shall be as David, and David as the angel of God. When no corruption shall be in our mind, will, or affections; when faith shall be turned to sight, hope to enjoyment.

DOCTRINE V. Then, and not till then, comes the church to perfection, when every member thereof, is brought to a perfect conformity with Christ, bearing a just proportion to him, as members proportioned to the head. This will certainly come to pass. Mystical Christ is yet growing; the head is at perfection, but the members some of them are yet wanting: none of them that are here below, are grown up to the just proportion, but till that be, mystical Christ is not perfect. This is a certain argument that it shall be. Christ will not always have his body so disproportioned to the head. An infinitely holy head, will at length have perfectly holy members. The head that has now got above all temptations, will certainly draw the feet out of the reach of Satan and corruption. The head that has got above the waters of the shadow of death and corruption, will certainly make our vile bodies like his glorious body; and as he arose from death, and now it hath no more dominion over him, so will he confirm our souls and bodies in a glorious state of immortality. All which may make believers long for that blessed day, and endeavour to antedate heaven's happiness as far as they can, in the pursuit of conformity to Christ, and growing up to that blessed head; remembering that all their backslidings and decays dishonour him egregiously, in so disfiguring his body and disproportioning his members. For direction how to go on to this perfection, take

DOCTRINE VI. As is our faith and knowledge of Christ, so is our growth and perfection. It is the knowledge of Christ, that introduces us to the blessed state of perfection. The more we believe in, and know Christ, the nearer are we to perfection; and when these are come to their perfection, then are we at our full growth.

Let us then, that are ministers, make this our great work, to get people to close with Christ, and get acquainted with him. O! if we could preach Christ, live Christ, and make him the scope of our life and doctrine, it would be well. Let all of us study to know him. The nearest way to perfection is knowledge; and all things else

necessary to salvation is to know Christ, who is that body of divinity which the Spirit of God teaches his scholars, "for God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face Jesus Christ." Amen.

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November 10, 1706.

BELIEVERS HAVING TRIBULATION IN THE WORLD.

SERMON XXXII.

JOHN xvi. 33,

*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

THIS is a dark and gloomy day, in which there seems to be a black cloud of wrath hanging over our heads; which if mercy prevent not, is like to fall heavy upon us; yet the storm never blows so hard, but the children of God may have peace; being, though upon a sea, yet in a ship that cannot sink. Our text is the conclusion of our Lord's farewell sermon to his disciples, in which we have the use and end of the whole, namely, that they might have peace. While he discoursed to them, he had in view their peace; that is inward peace and prosperity, contentment and quietness of mind in the midst of trouble. All this they might have in him; being united to him by faith, they might have peace in him, as Noah had in the ark, while the deluge was on the earth. His own word was the mean by which they were thus to obtain peace in him. This word leads the soul to Christ, where it may get peace, and teaches how to employ Christ for peace. "Unless thy law," says David, "had been my delight, I should then have perished in mine affliction."

We have next the necessity of his speaking these things to them for that end. "In the world ye shall have tribulation." In this world they must lay their account to meet with tribulation. In heaven there is no trouble, in earth no rest. They shall have trouble in and from the world, as they have peace in and from Christ. Observe the certainty of all this; it is not, you may have,