

SERMON III.*

Wherefore, he saith, when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.—Eph. iv. 8.

THE design of these words is to shew, that the gift of the ministry, and of ministers, of the office, and persons to discharge that office, is an eminent fruit of the exaltation of Christ, and a great expression and pledge of his care and love towards his church; and that is my doctrine, which I shall speak unto from them.

First, It is a gift, *Ἐαυτὸς ἔδωκεν*, ver. 11. ‘He himself gave.’ The foundation of the ministry is in the gift of Christ. Let me answer that question which he put once to the Pharisees, ‘The baptism of John, is it from heaven? or is it of men?’ In like manner, I say, the ministry, is it from heaven? or is it of men? The answer is, in the text, He gave; it is the gift of Christ. It is also the great promise, that he would do so; Jer. iii. 15. ‘I will give you pastors according to my own heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.’ When shall that be? ‘When,’ saith he, ‘I shall take you, one of a city and two of a family, and bring you to Zion,’ as it is said in ver. 14. Or, when I shall call you by the gospel, then I will give you pastors according to my own heart. And that this is a promise of the gospel, and so intended in that place of Jeremiah, you may see, chap. xxiii. 4. where the promise is repeated, ‘I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them.’ Ver. 5. ‘When I raise unto David a righteous branch, a king that shall reign and prosper.’ It is the great promise that, under the gospel, Christ would give ministers to his church.

It may be said, we know how Christ gave apostles when he was on earth; he called them, chose them, sent them; but how doth Christ now continue to give ministers to his church? That we may not claim an interest in a gift, and a privilege that we have no right unto—I say, by four ways

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or means doth Christ continue to give ministers in all ages unto his church. The church is to consider them as that which is the bottom and foundation of the duties they perform, and of the work undertaken this day.

First, He doth it 'by the standing law, ordinance, and institution of the gospel,' whereby he hath appointed this office of the ministry in the church, as the great Mediator of it. All the saints in the world, all the disciples of Christ, neither could nor ought (whatever necessity they could have thought they had seen of it, whatever congruity from the light of nature) to have appointed teachers nor officers among them, neither could it ever have been blessed unto their advantage, if Christ had not, by a standing ordinance and law, appointed such an office: and if that law comes to an end, if its obligation ceases, the work of the ministry, and the whole office of it must cease also: but if this ordinance be, 'as the ordinances of heaven,' of the sun, moon, and stars, that change not, it shall never be altered in this world. It is plain then, the neglect of the work and office of the ministry is so far a rebellion against the authority of Christ. 'All power,' saith he, Matt. xxviii. 18, 19. 'is given to me in heaven and earth; therefore go preach the gospel, and I am with you to the end of the world.' He is exalted, and he gives some to be pastors and some to be teachers, until all the elect of God are brought unto the unity of the faith, and unto a perfect man; unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

Secondly, The second thing he doth, is 'the giving spiritual gifts' unto men, whereby they may be enabled unto the discharge of the office of the ministry, as to the edification of the church, in all the ends of it. Gifts make no man a minister; but all the world cannot make a minister of Christ, without gifts. If the Lord Jesus Christ should cease to give out spiritual gifts unto men for the work of the ministry, he need do no more to take away the ministry itself; it must cease also: and it is the very way the ministry ceases in apostatising churches, Christ no more giving out unto them of the gifts of his Spirit; and all their outward forms and order, which they can continue, are of no signification in his sight.

Thirdly, Christ doth it by giving power unto his church

to call persons to that office, by him appointed and prepared by the gifts he bestows. And you may observe three things concerning this power.

1. That this power in the church is not despotical, lordly, and absolute. It is not from any authority of their own; but it consists in an absolute compliance with the command of Christ; it is but the doing what Christ hath commanded, and that gives virtue, efficacy, and power unto it. Look not upon us as though, by our power and our virtue, may the church say, we have made this man a minister this day. It is in the name and authority of Jesus Christ alone by which we act; in obedience unto that, he is so constituted and appointed.

2. There is no power in any church to choose any one whom Christ hath not chosen before; i. e. No church can make a man formally a minister, that Christ hath not made so materially; if I may so say. If Christ hath not pre-instructed and prefurnished him with gifts, it is not in the power of the church to choose or call him. And where these two things are, where the law of Christ is the foundation, and where the gifts of Christ are the preparative; thereupon the church calls, and persons are constituted elders by the Holy Ghost, and overseers of the flock, as in Acts xx. 28. Because he gave the law of the office, and because he gave these gifts to the officers, therefore are they constituted by the Holy Ghost. They were the ordinary elders of the church of Ephesus, to whom the apostle gives in charge 'to feed the flock of God, over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers.'

3. The way whereby the church doth call or constitute any person into this office thus appointed, is by giving themselves up unto him in the Lord, which they testify by their solemn choice and election by suffrage: the way, I say, is by submitting themselves unto him in the Lord, witnessing it by their solemn suffrage in the choice of him. 2 Cor. viii. 5. 'And this they did,' saith the apostle, viz. the saints of Macedonia, 'not as we hoped,' much beyond our expectation, 'but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.' It is the great work you have to do, let me tell you, of this church, in your calling of an officer, to give up yourselves unto him by the will of God, to be led, guided, in-

structed, directed, to have the work of the ministry fulfilled among you to your edification : and this submission, wherein (as I could evince by arguments sufficient) the essence of the call doth consist, is to be testified by suffrage or by choice. When God ordered the Levites to be set apart unto the service of the tabernacle, in the name, and on the behalf of the whole congregation ; to shew what weight he laid upon the consent and suffrage of the people, he caused all the people to come together, and to lay their hands upon them ; Num. viii. 9, 10. ‘Thou shalt bring the Levites before the tabernacle of the congregation ; and thou shalt gather the whole assembly of the children of Israel together :’ all the church. ‘And thou shalt bring the Levites before the Lord, and the children of Israel shall put their hands upon the Levites :’ viz. to testify their consent in their solemn dedication to the Lord, to minister in the tabernacle in their name, and on their behalf.

We have, in the New Testament, thirteen times mentioned the setting apart of ministers unto their office ; some of which I shall mention. The first account is in Acts i. 15. unto the end. It was while they were praying, upon a sermon of Peter’s, which he preached unto them, that they went about their work ; ‘for every thing is sanctified by the word and prayer.’ There was an apostle to be called. But here God was to have a peculiar, sovereign interposition, and to give a special manifestation of his own divine choice ; so that it could not be absolutely left unto the choice of the church. Yet thus far they went, that, antecedently unto God’s choice, ‘they appointed two ;’ v. 23. This was the first church act that ever was performed in the New Testament. There was in it a pattern to be laid for after times and ages. Let the church proceed as far as possible with a reserve to the sovereignty of God. ‘They appointed two ;’ so far, I say, they went : and then God took his man. But still, to preserve the liberty of the church herein, it is added, when God had taken him, *συγκατεψηφίσθη*, he was, by common suffrage, as the word signifies, reckoned among the apostles. There was antecedently allowed them the choice of two ; and consequently, their common suffrage, that he should be among the number of the apostles. The next call we have is in Acts vi. which is the ‘call of deacons ;’ where

the whole matter is, by the assembly of apostles, referred unto the body of the church. One would wonder how such a forgetfulness should befall a world of men who call themselves Christians, to do all these things without them, as though the church had no concern in them, when the whole body of the apostles, being assembled together (who had all the power and authority in their hands, as Christ had committed unto any of the children of men), direct the church to use what power Christ had intrusted them with. 'Brethren,' say they, 'look out from among yourselves;' ver. 3. 'And the saying pleased the whole multitude;' ver. 5. 'And they chose Stephen, a man full of the Holy Ghost;' and so the rest, who were afterward set apart. If all the apostles were upon the earth together, where there was in truth a church of Christ, called according to his mind, they would not undertake to deprive the church of their liberty, which any man now, who is far from an apostle, you know, will take upon him at any time. A third Scripture, where it is mentioned, is Acts xiv. 23. 'And when they had ordained them elders in every church,' &c. I confess, I am not free to manage the argument now from this place, although it is the most cogent; because it depends merely and purely upon the signification of the original word. Only this I would recommend to you, that before interest had guided men in what they had to do, all the translations, that were extant in English, did read this text, 'And ordained them elders by election,' as the word doth signify: so you will find it in your old translations. But since, it was left out to serve a turn. We may freely say, there is no one instance to be found in the whole New Testament, concerning the practical part of communicating an office unto any person, but it is peculiarly also declared, that it was done by the election of the multitude, or the body of the church.

This is the third way, whereby Christ continues to give these gifts unto men.

Fourthly, The fourth way is, by his law, ordinance, and institution, that the person so qualified, and so called, should be solemnly 'set apart by fasting and prayer.' So you have it, Acts xiv. 23. 'And when they had ordained them elders,' chose them elders 'in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord.' And upon the

like occasion, when Paul and Barnabas were to be separated anew unto a special work, it is said, Acts xiii. 3. 'When they had fasted and prayed, they sent them forth.'

These then are the four ways to answer that great inquiry, how doth Christ continue to give ministers unto the church? He doth it by his law, constituting the office, the law in the gospel, which is an everlasting ordinance. He doth it by his Spirit, communicating gifts unto persons. He doth it by his church calling of them, and by a submission to them according to the will of God, and testifying that submission by their suffrage. He doth it by his ordinance of solemnly setting them apart with fasting and prayer. And these, my brethren, are things that we are come together about this day. This is our faith, this is our warrant; wherein we do not pursue our own imaginations, nor the inventions of other men, nor follow cunningly devised fables; but from first to last have our warrant from Christ. The good Lord pardon us, wherein we come short of the preparation of the sanctuary, and accept us according to the desire of our hearts, to do the service of his house and tabernacle.

I will but speak a word or two of use to this part, and then we will proceed to that work which is your part this day; whereunto, if God give strength, I shall add some farther instructions, and then desire the help of our brethren present to carry it on.

First then, if there be any office, let it be under never so glorious, or so specious a title, if Christ hath not appointed that office by virtue of gospel ordinance and institution, there is a nullity in it; it is no gift of Christ, let who will bear it, and discharge it; with what formality soever they come unto it, popes and cardinals, metropolitans and diocesans, there is a nullity in the office, by reason there is no law, ordinance, or institution of Christ appointing of it. All the outward order and solemnity in the world, and all the holiness of persons, when engaging in such an office, cannot give it a right and title; because it wants the law of Christ for its foundation.

And where the office itself is appointed by Christ, if there be no communication of gifts unto the person; there is not a nullity in the office, absolutely; but there is a nullity as to the person. It is essential to the office, that Christ choose

the person by communicating of gifts unto him. Where this is not, I will not say, that there must always (for things are greatly varied with circumstances) be a nullity in all administrations; but there is a nullity in the person ministering before Christ.

Secondly, Let the church consider aright, how they are to receive, and what apprehensions they have of a minister that comes to them according to this law, order, and institution of Christ, which I have unfolded to you. He is a gift of Christ. It requires wisdom and prudence in a man to receive a gift: consider what he doth, he takes an obligation upon himself; much more to receive a gift from a prince. But to receive a gift, and so great a gift from Christ! Certainly there ought to be some particular preparation of our hearts for it. How great a mercy, how great a gift this is, I could easily demonstrate.

There are two things that I will but name, 1. Valuation and thankfulness. 2. Improvement. As soon as we are a church of God, these things are expected of us. When we receive so great a gift from Christ, he expects that it be valued, that it be thankfully received, and that it be duly improved.

And on the part of him, or of any of us, who are called to the ministry, undoubtedly it is incumbent upon us, so to behave ourselves, and so to approve ourselves, as that we may own ourselves to be a gift of Christ unto the church, and be owned by the church, as a gift of Christ. I do not know, for my own part, a more trembling thought that a minister hath, or can have in the consideration of his office, work, and duty, whereunto he is called, than this one; How shall I approve myself so, as to be looked on as a gift from Christ, given unto the church?

There are three things that are required in every one, who may be esteemed to be a gift given by Christ unto the church. 1. An imitation of Christ. 2. A representation of him. And, 3. Zeal for him.

1. 'An imitation of Christ,' as the great Shepherd of the flock, in meekness, in care, in love, in tenderness towards the whole flock. So Christ is described, Isa. xl. 11. 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and shall

gently lead those who are with young:’ here is the great pattern, here is an example for all who are shepherds of the flock under Christ (who intend to give an account with comfort unto the great Shepherd of the sheep, when he shall appear at the last day) in meekness and condescension, giving out help and assistance, bearing with all things, that cannot particularly be insisted upon; and especially conforming unto him, who knows how to have compassion on the ignorant, and them that are out of the way.

2. There is required, ‘a representation of Christ;’ and that in all his offices. (1.) A representation of him in the rule and conduct of the church. That the church under our rule and conduct, may be sensible that the government of Christ is spiritual and holy. What a woful representation of Christ is made by men, who undertake to rule the church of God, with rods and axes, with fire and fagot? Is this to represent the meek and holy King of the church, or rather, a devouring tyrant, unto the world? It is our great work in what interest Christ hath given us in the rule of the church, to represent him, as spiritual, as holy, as meek, as universally tending to edification, and not to destruction. (2.) To represent Christ in his prophetic office. He was the great teacher of the church; and the principal work of ministers is, ‘to preach the Word in season and out of season,’ by all means to carry on the church in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. I will give them ‘pastors that shall feed them with knowledge and understanding.’ Those who take upon themselves to be pastors, and neglect this work of feeding the flock, may, at as cheap a rate, and with equal modesty, renounce Jesus Christ.

(3.) Christ is to be represented in the imitable part of his sacerdotal office, which is to make continual prayers and intercession for the church, and that church in particular whereunto we belong. So the apostle speaks, Col. iv. 12. ‘Epaphras, who is one of you (i. e. he was one of their elders and teachers), a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.’ It is a great work thus, in all these things, to represent Christ in all his offices unto the church. And indeed, who is sufficient for these things? I might add,

3. 'Zeal for Christ.' He that comes as an ambassador from Christ, in Christ's stead, will have zeal for all the concerns of Christ in the church; for his worship, for the purity of his ordinances, for the conversion of souls, and for the building up of the saints. This is required of them who are thus a gift from Christ.

This is the first thing that my text doth suggest unto me, namely, that the ministry is the gift of Christ.

And having proceeded so far, I will here stay a little, and desire the church would attend to their work and duty. After which, if God give strength, I will speak somewhat more unto the eminency of this gift, according as it is set out in this text.

[Then the church assented to the election, by the lifting up of their hands; and the Doctor went on.]

I have shewed you, that the ministry and ministers are a gift that Christ himself gave the church. I shall now shew you, which was the second part of my proposition, 'that it is a great and eminent gift,' or an eminent fruit of the exaltation and mediation of Christ.

First, It appears to be so, from the 'great and glorious preparation' that was made for it. When did Christ give this gift? 'When,' saith he, 'he ascendeth up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.' The words are taken out of Psal. lxxviii. 17, 18. 'The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the holy place. Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men.' The words you see in the first place are spoken of God himself, applied by our apostle to Christ, upon these two grounds. 1. Because it was peculiarly the Son of God, who appeared so to the fathers under the Old Testament. It was he who appeared to Abraham, and gave him the promise; and to Moses in the bush: it was he who gave the law at mount Sinai; and appeared to Joshua for the conquest of Canaan, where the church was to be set up: so it was still the same person, though the articles were varied. 2. Because whatever was done in a way of solemnity under the Old Testament, was a representation, or a means of introducing of things that were to be done under the New. How did God lead captivity captive, on the glorious giving

of the law upon mount Sinai? That was the day wherein he made his people free. They had no rule, no order, no polity before that, but were under the relics of that captivity which they underwent in Egypt. God now had conquered Pharaoh, and triumphed gloriously over him in the Red Sea, over him and his host, who had kept the people so long in bondage. He led captivity captive, and brought forth his people into liberty, though it was but an initial liberty; it was a bondage in comparison of what was to ensue; but it was the beginning of liberty to them: and all this was to represent the glorious conquest at the ascension of Christ, expressed, Col. ii. 15. 'And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it, or in himself.' When he spoiled Pharaoh, he triumphed over him gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. It was the same divine person who did that as a type of what he would do, when he should spoil principalities and powers, Satan, death, hell, sin, and all the spiritual adversaries of the church, triumphing over them; then did he lead captivity captive. And therefore you may observe the change of the words, which all do who speak to this thing. In the Psalms, it is said, 'Thou hast ascended on high, and led captivity captive, and received gifts for men.' In my text it is said, 'He ascended on high, and led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.' Though Christ be spoken of as God in the sixty-eighth Psalm, wherein he was incapable of receiving gifts; yet it was in a mystery and prophecy, that he should be in that state and condition wherein he should receive them, and receive them that he might give them; as in Acts ii. 32. 'When he was exalted on the right hand of God, and received the gift of the Spirit,' he then gave it out unto men.

What is all this great preparation now for? What is it the apostle ushers in upon this theatre of glory? Nothing less than the giving of ministers unto the church. He ascended up on high, and led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. What I pray! some to be pastors and teachers. There is a greater glory in giving a minister to a poor congregation, than there is in the instalment and enthroning of all the popes and cardinals, and metropolitans that ever were in the world: let their glory be what it will, Christ is upon

his theatre of glory in the communication of this office, and these officers.

Wherein will you say is this glory? You see no beauty, no comeliness in it: no more did the unbelieving world in the person of Christ, nor ways of Christ. Was there not a great deal of glory in the setting apart of Aaron unto his service, in all his glorious garments and ornaments, with all the solemnity of sacrifices that was used therein? doubtless there was. But, saith our apostle, 'It had no glory in comparison of the ministry of the Spirit. This is a glory that doth excel;' 2 Cor. iii. 10. The reason why we see not the glory of it is, because we are carnal. It is a spiritual glory. God himself presides over the work of this day. 'I will place my tabernacle with them, and I will walk with them, and be their God;' Levit. xx. 13. If we are the church and tabernacle of God, God walks among us this day; Christ is among us by his special presence. 'Where two or three are met together in my name, there am I in the midst of them;' Matt. xviii. 20. And much more may his presence be expected in so great a transaction of his authority, as this we are now engaged in. The holy and elect angels are present with us, to give glory to the solemnity. Hence our apostle charges Timothy, 1 Tim. v. 21. 'I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, to observe these things.' Why before the elect angels? because they are present as witnesses in the collation of authority from Christ. Thou hast thousands of witnesses more than thou seest; there are more eyes upon thee than thou takest notice of; God is present, Christ is present, the elect angels are present. These things are the true and faithful sayings of God. Here then is glory and beauty, in that it is not only a gift, but an eminent gift. That is the first thing in my text.

Secondly, It is glorious and eminent from the foundation and spring of it, which is the humiliation and death of Christ. 'Now that he ascended, what is it, but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth.' Why doth the apostle mention here Christ's descending? Was it to take the advantage of a word? because, having mentioned his ascension, will he mention also his descension? no, that is not the way of the Holy Ghost. There was no reason to

mention it absolutely in this place : it must be with reference to the end, that was under consideration. There is something, saith he, in Christ's descending into the lower part of the earth, that doth contribute to this great gift of the ministry.

The lower part of the earth may have a double interpretation. 1. The earth may be spoken of with reference to the whole world. 2. Some part of the earth may be spoken of with reference to some other part.

If you take it in the first sense, Christ's descending into the lower part of the earth, i. e. into this lower part of the creation, which the earth is ; then it is the incarnation of Christ, and his humiliation, that he intends ; which is so expressed, John iii. 13. ' No man hath ascended up into heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man,' &c. Christ's descending and coming down, was by taking our nature upon him ; so it may be here. He descended into the lower part of the earth, i. e. He came and assumed our nature, and was here in a state of humiliation.

Or, 2. The lower part of the earth intends a comparison between some part of the earth itself ; and so may be taken for the grave ; he descended into the grave. The burial of Christ, which was a great and evident testimony of his real death, is that which is intended ; and so I look upon it in this place. The very descent of Christ into the grave, which is the lowest part of the earth that mankind descend into, is the apostle's meaning.

And observe from hence, that the death of Christ hath a great influence into this gift of the ministry. It is a branch that grew out of the grave of Christ : let it be esteemed as lightly as men please, had not Christ died for it, we had not had a ministry in the world.

And two ways the ministry relates to the death of Christ. 1. Because it was necessary unto his receiving of that power, whereby alone he was able to give ministers. See that at large, Phil. ii. 6—10. ' It was his humbling himself unto the death, even the death of the cross,' that was required to ' that exaltation,' whereby he had power to give ministers. The mediatorial authority of Christ, whereby he was enabled to give ministers to the church, was founded in his death. And, 2. It respects his death, because the very end of the

ministry is, to preach that peace to mankind, which was made by the death of Christ; Eph. ii. 14. 'He is our peace,' he hath made peace for us; and, in ver. 17. 'came and preached peace to those who were afar off, and to those who were nigh.' How did Christ come and preach peace to the Gentiles, to them that were afar off? It was no otherwise than by instituting the office of the ministry, and sending his ministers to preach peace to them. And we that are ministers may know the near relation of our office to the death of Christ, which will greatly direct us in the work we have to do; which is, I say, to preach that peace that was made with God by Christ. This is another thing in the text that sets forth the beauty, glory, and eminency of this great gift of Christ.