

The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry

by Gilbert Tennent

“And Jesus, when He came out, saw much people and was moved with compassion towards them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd.” (Mark 6:34)

As a faithful ministry is a great ornament, blessing, and comfort, to the church of God (even the feet of such messengers are beautiful), so, on the contrary, an ungodly ministry is a great curse and judgment. These caterpillars labor to devour every green thing.

There is nothing that may more justly call forth our saddest sorrows, and make all our powers and passions mourn in the most doleful accents, the most incessant, insatiable, and deploring agonies, than the melancholy case of such who have no faithful ministry! This truth is set before our minds in a strong light in the words that I have chosen now to insist upon, in which we have an account of our Lord’s grief with the causes of it.

We are informed that our dear Redeemer was moved with compassion towards them. The original word signifies the strongest and most vehement pity, issuing from the innermost bowels. But what was the cause of this great and compassionate commotion in the heart of Christ? It was because He saw much people as sheep having no shepherd. Why, had the people then no teachers? O yes! They had heaps of Pharisee-teachers that came out, no doubt, after they had been at the feet of Gamaliel the usual time, and according to the acts, canons, and traditions of the Jewish church. But, notwithstanding the great crowds of these orthodox, letter-learned, and regular Pharisees, our Lord laments the unhappy case of that great number of people who, in the days of His flesh, had no letter guides, because those were as good as none (in many respects), in our Savior’s judgment. For all them, the people were as sheep without a Shepherd.

From the words of our text, the following proposition offers itself to our consideration: that the case of such is much to be pitied who have no other but Pharisee-shepherds, or unconverted teachers.

In discoursing upon this subject, I would

I. Inquire into the characters of the old Pharisee-teachers.

II. Show why the case of such people who have no better should be pitied. And,

III. Show how pity should be expressed upon this mournful occasion!

First, I am to inquire into the characters of the old Pharisee-teachers. No, I think the most notorious branches of their character were these: pride, policy, malice, ignorance, covetousness, and bigotry to human inventions in religious matters.

The old Pharisees were very proud and conceited. They loved the uppermost seats in the synagogues and to be called “Rabbi.” They were masterly and positive in their assertions, as if knowledge must die with them. They looked upon others who differed from them, and the common people, with an air of disdain and, especially any who had a respect for Jesus and His doctrine. They disliked them and judged them accursed.

The old Pharisee-shepherds were as crafty as foxes. They tried by all means to ensnare our Lord by their captious questions, and to expose Him to the displeasure of the state while, in the meantime, by sly and sneaking methods, they tried to secure for themselves the favor of the Grandees and the people’s displeasure, and this they obtained to their satisfaction (John 7:48).

But while they exerted the craft of foxes, they did not forget to breathe forth the cruelty of wolves in a malicious aspersing of the person of Christ, and in a violent opposing of the truths, people, and power of His religion. Yes, the most stern and strict of them were the ringleaders of the party. Witness Saul’s journey to Damascus, with letters from the chief priest to bring bound to Jerusalem all that he could find of The Way. It’s true that the Pharisees did not proceed to violent measures with our Savior and His disciples just at first; but that was not owing to their good nature, but their policy, for they feared the people. They must keep the people in their interests. Aye, that was the main chance, the compass that directed all their proceedings and, therefore, such sly cautious methods must be pursued as might consist herewith. They

wanted to root vital religion out of the world, but they found it beyond their thumb.

Although some of the old Pharisee-shepherds had a very fair and strict outside, yet they were ignorant of the New Birth. Witness Rabbi Nicodemus, who talked like a fool about it. Hear how our Lord cursed those plastered hypocrites in Matthew 23: 27–28: “Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye are like whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead bones and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Aye, if they had but a little of the learning then in fashion, and a fair outside, they were presently put into the priest’s office, though they had no experience of the New Birth. O sad!

The old Pharisees, for all their long prayers and other pious pretenses, had their eyes, with Judas, fixed upon the bag. Why, they came into the priest’s office for a piece of bread. They took it up as a trade and, therefore, endeavored to make the best market of it they could. O shame!

It may be further observed that the Pharisee-teachers in Christ’s time were great bigots to small matters in religion. Matthew 23:23: “Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye pay tithe of mind, and anise, and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the Law, judgment, mercy, and faith.” The Pharisees were fired with a party-zeal. They compassed sea and land to make a proselyte; and yet, when he was made, they made him twofold more the child of hell than themselves. They were also bigoted to human inventions in religious matters. Paul himself, while he was a natural man, was wonderfully zealous for the traditions of the Fathers. Aye, those poor, blind guides, as our Lord testifies, strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel.

And what a mighty respect they had for the Sabbath Day, insomuch that Christ and His disciples must be charged with the breach thereof for doing works of mercy and necessity! Ah, the rottenness of these hypocrites! It was not so much respect to the Sabbath as malice against Christ; that was the occasion of the charge. They wanted some plausible pretense to offer against Him in order to blacken His character.

And what a great love had they in pretense to those pious prophets who were dead before they

were born while, in the meantime, they were persecuting the Prince of Prophets! Hear how the King of the Church speaks to them upon this head, Matthew 23:29–33: “Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous; and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”

The second general head of discourse is to show why much people, who have no better than the old Pharisee-teachers, are to be pitied:

1. Natural men have no call of God to the ministerial work under the gospel dispensation.

Isn’t it a principal part of the ordinary call of God to the ministerial work to aim at the glory of God and, in subordination thereunto, the good of souls as their chief marks in their undertaking that work? And can any natural man on earth do this? No! No! Every skin of them has an evil eye, for no cause can produce effects above its own power. Are not wicked men forbidden to meddle in things sacred? Psalm 50:16: “But unto the wicked, God saith, ‘What hast thou to do to declare My statutes, or that thou shouldst take My covenant in thy mouth?’” Now, are not all unconverted men wicked men? Does not the Lord Jesus inform us in John 10:1 that “he who entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber?” In the 9th verse, Christ tells us that He is the Door, and that if any man enters in by Him, he shall be saved by Him, i.e., by faith in Him, says (Matthew) Henry. Hence we read of a “door of faith” being opened to the Gentiles (Acts 14:22).

It confirms that salvation is annexed to the entrance before mentioned. Remarkable is that saying of our Savior in Matthew 4:9: “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” See, our Lord will not make men ministers till they follow Him. Men who do not follow Christ may fish faithfully for a good name, and for worldly self, but not for the conversion of sinners to God. Is it reasonable to suppose that they will be earnestly concerned for others’ salvation when they slight their own? Our Lord reproveth Nicodemus for taking upon himself the office of instructing others while he himself was a stranger to the New

Birth. John 3:10: “Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?” The Apostle Paul (1 Tim. 1:12) thanks God for counting him faithful, and putting him into the ministry, which plainly supposes that God Almighty does not send Pharisees and natural men into ministry; for how can those men be faithful who have no faith? It’s true, men may put themselves into the ministry through unfaithfulness or mistake. Credit and money may draw them, and the devil may drive them into it, knowing by long experience of what special service they may be to his kingdom in that office; but God does not send such hypocritical varlets.

Hence Timothy was directed by the Apostle Paul to commit the ministerial work to faithful men (2 Tim. 2:2), and do not those qualifications necessary for church-officers, specified in 1 Timothy 3:2–3, 9–11 and Titus 1:7–8 plainly suppose converting grace? How else can they avoid being greedy of filthy lucre? How else can they hold the mystery of faith in a pure conscience and be faithful in all things? How else can they be lovers of good, sober, just, holy, temperate?

2. The ministry of natural men is uncomfortable to gracious souls.

The enmity that is put between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent will, now and then, be creating jars. And no wonder; for as it was of old, so it is now: “He that was born after the flesh, persecuteth him that was born after the Spirit.” This enmity is not one grain less in unconverted ministers than in others; though it is possible it may be better polished with wit and rhetoric, and gilded with the specious names of zeal, fidelity, peace, good order, and unity.

Natural men, not having true love to Christ or the souls of their fellow-creatures, find their discourses are cold and sapless, and, as it were, freeze between their lips. And not being sent of God, they lack the divine authority with which the faithful ambassadors of Christ are clothed, who herein resemble their blessed Master of whom it is said, “He taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:29).

And Pharisee-teachers, having no experience of a special work of the Holy Ghost upon their own souls, are therefore neither inclined to nor fitted for discoursing frequently, clearly, and pathetically upon such important subjects. The

application of their discourses is either short or indistinct and general. They do not distinguish the precious from the vile, and divide not to every man his portion, according to the apostolic direction to Timothy. No! They carelessly offer a common mess to their people, and leave it to them to divide it among themselves as they see fit. This is, indeed, their general practice, which is bad enough; but sometimes they do worse by misapplying the Word through ignorance or anger. They often strengthen the hands of the wicked by promising him life. They comfort people before they convince them, sow before they plow, and are busy in raising a fabric before they lay a foundation. These foolish builders do but strengthen men’s carnal security by their soft, selfish, cowardly discourses. They do not have the courage or honesty to thrust the nail of terror into sleeping souls.

Nay, sometimes they strive with all their might to fasten terror into the hearts of the righteous, and so to make those sad whom God would not have made sad! And this happens when pious people begin to suspect their hypocrisy, for which they have good reason, I may add that, inasmuch as Pharisee-teachers seek after righteousness, as it were, by the works of the law themselves, they therefore do not distinguish as they ought between Law and Gospel in their discourses to others. They keep driving, driving, to duty, duty, under this notion that it will recommend natural men to the favor of God, or entitle them to the promises of grace and salvation. And thus those blind guides fix a deluded world upon the false foundation of their own righteousness, and so exclude them from the dear Redeemer.

All the doings of unconverted men not proceeding from the principles of faith, love, and a new nature, nor being directed to the divine glory as their highest end, but flowing from, and tending to, self as their principle and end, are, doubtless, damnably wicked in their manner of performance, and deserve the wrath and curse of a sin-avenging God. Neither can any other encouragement be justly given them but that, in the way of duty, there is a peradventure of probability or obtaining mercy.

And natural men, lacking the experience of those spiritual difficulties which pious souls are exposed to in this vale of tears, do not know how

to speak a word to the weary in season. Their prayers are also cold; little child-like love to God or pity to poor perishing souls runs through their veins. Their conversation has nothing of the savor of Christ, neither is it perfumed with the spices of heaven. They seem to make as little distinction in their practice as preaching. They love those unbelievers that are kind to them better than many Christians, and choose them for companions, contrary to Psalm 15:4, Psalm 119:115 and Galatians 6:10. Poor Christians are stunted and starved who are put to feed on such bare pastures, on such “dry nurses,” as Rev. Mr. (Arthur) Hildersham justly calls them. It’s only when the wise virgins sleep that they can bear with those dead dogs who can’t bark; but when the Lord revives His people, they can’t but abhor them. O! It is ready to break their very hearts with grief, to see how lukewarm those Pharisee-teachers are in their public discourses, while sinners are sinking into damnation in multitudes! But:

3. The ministry of natural men is, for the most part, unprofitable, which is confirmed by a three-fold evidence of Scripture, reason, and experience. Such as the Lord sends not, He Himself assures us, shall not profit the people at all (Jer. 23:32). Matthew Poole justly glosses upon this passage of sacred Scripture thus, “None can expect God’s blessing upon their ministry that are not called and sent of God into the ministry.” And right reason will inform us how unfit instruments they are to negotiate that work they pretend to. Is a blind man fit to be a guide in a very dangerous way? Is a dead man fit to bring others to life? A mad man fit to give to cast out devils? A rebel, an enemy to God, fit to be sent on an embassy of peace to bring rebels into a state of friendship with God? A captive bound in the massy chains of darkness and guilt, a proper person to set others at liberty? A leper, or one that has plague-sores upon him, fit to be a good physician? Is an ignorant rustic that has never been at sea in his life fit to be a pilot, to keep vessels from being dashed to pieces upon rocks and sand-banks? Isn’t an unconverted minister like a man who would teach others to swim before he has learned it himself, and so is drowned in the act and dies like a fool?

I may add that sad experience verifies what has been now observed concerning the unprofitableness of the ministry of unconverted men.

Look into the congregations of unconverted ministers, and see what a sad security reigns there; not a soul convinced that can be heard of for many years together, and yet the ministers are easy, for they say they do their duty! Aye, a small matter will satisfy us in the lack of that which we have no great desire after, but when persons have their eyes opened and their hearts set upon the work of God, they are not so soon satisfied with their doings, and with lack of success for a time. O! They mourn with Micah that they are as those that gather the summer-fruits, as the grape-gleaning of the vintage. Mr. (Richard) Baxter justly observes that those who speak about their doings in the aforesaid manner are likely to do little good to the Church of God. But many Ministers (as Mr. Bracel observes) think the gospel flourishes among them when the people are in peace, and many come to hear the Word and to the Sacrament. If, with the other, they get the salaries well-paid, then it is fine times indeed in their opinion! O sad! And they are full of hopes that they do good, though they know nothing about it. But what comfort can a conscientious man, who travails in birth that Christ may be formed in His hearer’s hearts, take from what he knows not? Will a hungry stomach be satisfied with dreams about meat? I believe not, though, I confess, a full one may.

What if some instances could be shown of unconverted ministers being instrumental in convincing persons of their lost state? The thing is very rare and extraordinary. And, for what I know, as many instances may be given of Satan’s convincing persons by his temptations. Indeed, it’s a kind of chance-medly, both in respect of the father and his children, when any such event happens. And isn’t this the reason why a work of conviction and conversion has been so rarely heard of for a long time in the churches till of late, that the bulk of her spiritual guides were stone-blind and stone-dead?

4. The ministry of natural men is dangerous, both in respect of the doctrines and practice of piety. The doctrines of original sin, justification by faith alone, and the other points of Calvinism, are very cross to the grain of unrenewed nature. And though men, by the influence of a good education and hopes of preferment, may have the edge of their natural enmity against them blunted,

yet it's far from being broken or removed. It's only the saving grace of God that can give us a true relish for those nature-humbling doctrines; and so effectually secure us from being infected by the contrary. Is not the carnality of the ministry one great cause of the general spread of Arminianism, Socinianism, Arianism, and Deism, at this day through the world?

And alas! What poor guides are natural ministers to those who are under spiritual trouble? They either slight such distress altogether and call it "melancholy," or "madness," or daub those that are under it with untempered mortar. Our Lord assures us that the salt which has lost its savor is good for nothing. Some say, "It genders worms and vermin." Now, what savor have Pharisee-ministers? In truth, a very stinking one, both in the nostrils of God and good men. "Be these moral Negroes never so white in the mouth (as one expresses it), yet will they hinder instead of helping others in at the strait gate." Hence is that threatening of our Lord against them in Matthew 23:13: "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, nor suffer those that are entering to go in."

Pharisee-teachers will, with the utmost hate, oppose the very work of God's Spirit upon the souls of men, and labor by all means to blacken it, as well as the Instruments, which the Almighty improves to promote the same if it comes near their borders, and interferes with their credit or interest. Thus did the Pharisees deal with our Savior.

If it is objected against what has been offered under this general head of discourse, that Judas was sent by Christ, I answer:

(1) That Judas's ministry was partly legal, inasmuch as, during that period, the disciples were subject to Jewish observances and sent only to the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). And in that they waited after Christ's resurrection for another mission (Acts 1:4), which we find they obtained, and that was different from the former (Matt. 28:19).

(2) Judas's ministry was extraordinarily necessary in order to fulfil some ancient prophecies concerning him (Acts 1:16-18, 20; John 13:18). I fear that the abuse of this instance has brought many Judases into the ministry whose chief desire, like their great grandfather, is to

finger the pence and carry the bag. But let such hireling, murderous hypocrites take care that they don't feel the force of a halter in this world, and an aggravated damnation in the next.

Again, if it is objected that Paul rejoiced that the gospel was preached, though of contention and not sincerely, I answer this: the expression signifies the apostle's great self-denial! Some labored to eclipse his fame and character by contentious preaching, thinking thereby to afflict him; but they were mistaken. As to that, he was easy; for he had long before learned to die to his own reputation. The apostle's rejoicing was comparative only. He would rather that Christ should be preached out of envy than not at all, especially considering the gross ignorance of the doctrinal knowledge of the gospel which prevailed almost universally in that age of the world. Besides, the apostle knew that that trial should be sanctified to him to promote his spiritual progress in goodness and, perhaps, prove a means of procuring his temporal freedom; and, therefore, he would rejoice. It is certain, we may both rejoice and mourn in relation to the same thing upon different accounts without any contradiction.

But the third general head was to show how pity should be expressed upon this mournful occasion.

My brethren, we should mourn over those who are destitute of faithful ministers and sympathize with them. Our bowels should be moved with the most compassionate tenderness over those dear fainting souls that are as "sheep having no Shepherd," and that after the example of our blessed Lord.

Dear sirs! We should also most earnestly pray for them that the compassionate Savior may preserve them by His mighty power, through faith, unto salvation; support their sinking spirits under the melancholy uneasiness of a dead ministry; sanctify and sweeten to them the dry morsels they get under such blind men, when they have none better to repair to.

And more especially, my brethren, we should pray to the Lord of the harvest to send forth faithful laborers into His harvest, seeing that the harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. And, O sirs, how humble, believing, and importunate should we be in this petition! O! Let us follow the Lord day and night with cries, tears,

pleadings, and groanings upon this account! For God knows there is great necessity of it. O! Thou Fountain of mercy and Father of pity, pour forth upon Thy poor children a Spirit of prayer for the obtaining of this important mercy! Help, help, O Eternal God and Father, for Christ's sake!

And indeed, my brethren, we should join our endeavors to our prayers. The most likely method to stock the church with a faithful ministry, in the present situation of things, the public academies being so much corrupted and abused generally, is to encourage private schools, or seminaries of learning, which are under the care of skilful and experienced Christians; in which those only should be admitted who, upon strict examination have, in the judgment of a reasonable charity, the plain evidences of experimental religion. Pious and experienced youths, who have a good natural capacity, and great desires after the ministerial work, from good motives, might be sought for, and found up and down in the country, and put to private schools of the Prophets, especially in such places where the public ones are not.

This method, in my opinion, has a noble tendency. It builds up the church for the coming of His Kingdom. The church should be ready, according to their ability, to give something, from time to time, for the support of such poor youths who have nothing of their own. And truly, brethren, this charity to the souls of men is the most noble kind of charity. O! If the love of God is in you, it will constrain you to do something to promote so noble and necessary a work. It looks hypocritical to go no further, when other things are required, than cheap prayer. Don't think it much if the Pharisees should be offended at such a proposal; these subtle, selfish hypocrites are wont to be scared about their credit and their kingdom. And truly they are both little worth, for all the bustle they make about them. If they could help it, they wouldn't let one faithful man come into the ministry; and, therefore, their opposition is an encouraging sign. Let all the followers of the Lamb stand up and act for God against all opposers. Who is upon God's side? Who?

The improvement of this subject remains:

1. If it is so, then the case of those who have no other, or no better, than Pharisee-teachers is to be pitied. Then what a scroll and scene of mourning, lamentation, and woe is opened, because of

the swarms of locusts, the crowds of Pharisees, that have so covetously and cruelly crept into the ministry in this adulterous generation! They as nearly resemble the character given of the old Pharisees, in the doctrinal part of this discourse, as one crow's egg does another. It is true, some of the modern Pharisees have learned to prate a little more orthodoxy about the New Birth than their predecessor Nicodemus, who are, in the meantime, as great strangers to the feeling experience of it as he. They are blind who see not this to be the case of the body of the clergy of this generation. And O! that our heads were waters, and our eyes a fountain of tears, that we could day and night lament, with the utmost bitterness, the doleful case of the poor church of God upon this account.

2. From what has been said, we may learn that such who are contented under a dead ministry do not have in them the temper of that Savior they profess. It's an awful sign that they are as blind as moles and as dead as stones without any spiritual taste and relish. And alas! Isn't this the case of multitudes? If they can get one who has the name of a minister, with a band and a black coat or gown to carry on a Sabbath-day among them, although never so coldly and unsuccessfully; if he is free from gross crimes in practice and takes good care to keep at a due distance from their consciences, and is never troubled about his unsuccessfulness, "O!" think the poor fools, "that is a fine man, indeed! Our minister is a prudent, charitable man; he is not always harping upon terror, and sounding damnation in our ears, like some rash-headed preachers who, by their uncharitable methods, are ready to put poor people out of their wits, or to run them into despair. O! How terrible a thing is that despair! Aye, our minister, honest man, gives us good caution against it." Poor, silly souls, consider seriously these passages of the Prophet Jeremiah (5:30-31).

3. We may learn the mercy and duty of those who enjoy a faithful ministry. Let such glorify God for distinguishing a privilege, and labor to walk worthy of it to all well-pleasing. Left for their abuse thereof, they are exposed to a greater damnation.

4. If the ministry of natural men is as it has been represented, then it is both lawful and expedient to go from them to hear godly persons; yea, it's so far from being sinful to do this that

one who lives under a pious minister of lesser gifts, after having honestly endeavored to get benefit by his ministry, and yet gets little or none, but finds real benefit elsewhere, I say, he may lawfully go, and that frequently, where he gets most good to his precious soul. He may do this after regular application to the pastor where he lives for his consent, proposing the reasons thereof when this is done in the spirit of love and meekness, without contempt of any, and also without rash anger or vain curiosity.

Natural reason will inform us that good is desirable for its own sake. Now, a Dr. Voetius observes that good added to good makes it a greater good, and so more desirable; and, therefore, evil as evil, or a lesser good, which is comparatively evil, cannot be the object of desire.

There is a natural instinct put even into the irrational creature by the Author of their being to seek after the greater natural good, as far as they know it. Hence, the birds of the air fly to the warmer climates in order to shun the winter cold, and also, doubtless, to get better food; for where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together. The beasts of the field seek the best pastures, and the fishes of the ocean seek after the food they like best.

But the written Word of God confirms the aforesaid proposition while God, by it, enjoins us, “to covet earnestly the best gifts; as also to prove all things, and hold fast that which is good” (1 Cor. 12:31 and 1 Thess. 5:2). And is it not the command of God that we should grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18 and 1 Pet. 2:2)? Now, does not every positive command enjoin the use of such means as have the directest tendency to answer the end designed, namely, the duty commanded? If there is a variety of means, is not the best to be chosen? Else how can the choice be called rational and becoming an intelligent creature? To choose otherwise, knowingly, is it not contrary to common sense as well as religion, and daily confuted by the common practice of all the rational creation, about things of far less moment and consequence?

That there is a difference and variety in preachers’ gifts and graces is undeniably evident from the united testimony of Scripture and reason. And that there is a great difference in the degrees of hearers’ edification, under the hearing of these

different gifts, is an evident to the feeling of experienced Christians as anything can be to sight.

It is also an unquestionable truth that, ordinarily, God blesses most the best gifts for the hearer’s edification, as by the best food He gives the best nourishment. Otherwise, the best gifts would not be desirable, and God Almighty, in the ordinary course of His providence, by not acting according to the nature of things, would be carrying on a series of unnecessary miracles which, to suppose, is unreasonable. The following places of Holy Scripture confirm what has been last observed: 1 Corinthians 14:12; 1 Timothy 4:14–16; 2 Timothy 1:6 and Acts 11:24.

If God’s people have a right to the gifts of all God’s ministers, pray, why may they not use them as they have opportunity? And, if they should go a few miles farther than ordinary to enjoy those which they profit most by, who do they wrong? Now, our Lord informs His people in 1 Corinthians 3:22 that whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, all was theirs.

But the example of our dear Redeemer will give farther light in this argument. Though many of the hearers, not only of the Pharisees but of John the Baptist, came to hear our Savior, and that not only upon week-days, but upon Sabbath-days, and that in great numbers, and from very distant places; yet He reproveth them not. And did not our Lord love the Apostle John more than the rest, and took him with Him, before others, with Peter and James, to Mount Tabor and Gethsemane (Matthew chapters 17 and 26)?

To bind men to a particular minister, against their judgment and inclinations, when they are more edified elsewhere, is carnal with witness, a cruel oppression of tender consciences, a compelling of men to sin. For he that doubts is damned if he eats, and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Besides, it is an unscriptural infringement on Christian liberty (1 Cor. 3:22). It’s a yoke worse than that of Rome itself. Dr. Voetius asserts, “Even among the Papists, as to hearing of sermons, that people are not deprived of the liberty of choice.” It’s a yoke like that of Egypt which cruel Pharaoh formed for the necks of the oppressed Israelites when he obliged them to make up their stated task of bricks, but allowed them no straw. So we must grow in grace and knowledge; but, in the meantime, according to

the notion of some, we are confined from using the likeliest means to attain that end.

If the great ends of hearing may be attained as well, and better, by hearing another minister than our own, then I see not why we should be under a fatal necessity of hearing him, I mean our parish-minister, perpetually or generally. Now, what are, or ought to be, the ends of hearing but the getting of grace and growing in it (Rom. 10:14)? First Peter 2:2 says, “As babes desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow there by.” (Poor babes do not like dry breasts, and living men do not like dead pools.) Well then, may not these ends be obtained out of our parish-line? Faith is said to come by hearing (Rom. 10). But the apostle doesn’t add, “your parish-minister.” Isn’t the same Word preached out of our parish? And is there any restriction in the promises of blessing the Word to those only who keep within their parish-line ordinarily? If there is, I have not yet met with it; yea, I can affirm that, so far as knowledge can be had in such cases, I have known persons to get saving good to their souls by hearing over their parish-line; and this makes me earnest in defense of it.

That which ought to be the main motive of hearing any, that is, our soul’s good or greater good, will excite us if we regard our own eternal interest, to hear there where we attain it; and he that hears with less views acts like a fool and a hypocrite.

Now, if it is lawful to withdraw from the ministry of a pious man in the case aforesaid, how much more from the ministry of a natural man? Surely, it is both lawful and expedient for the reason offered in the doctrinal part of this discourse; to which let me add a few words more.

To trust the care of our souls to those who have little or no care for their own, to those who are both unskillful and unfaithful, is contrary to the common practice of considerate mankind, relating to the affairs of their bodies and estates, and would signify that we set light by our souls and did not care what became of them. For if the blind lead the blind, will they not both fall into the ditch?

Is it a strange thing to think that God does not ordinarily use the ministry of His enemies to turn others to be His friends, seeing He works by suitable means? I cannot think that God has given

any promise that He will be with and bless the labors of natural ministers for, if He had, He would be surely as good as His Word. But I can neither see nor hear of any blessing upon these men’s labors, unless it is a rare, wonderful instance of chance-medley! Whereas, the ministry of faithful men blossoms and bears fruit as the rod of Aaron. Jeremiah 23:22: “But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.”

From such as have a form of godliness and deny the power thereof, we are enjoined to turn away (2 Tim. 3:5). And are there not many such?

Our Lord advised His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:6), by which He shows that He meant their doctrine and hypocrisy (Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1), which were both sour enough.

Memorable is the answer of our Lord to His disciples in Matthew 15:12–14: “Then came His disciples and said unto him, Knowest Thou that the Pharisees were offended? And He answered and said, Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up. Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind: And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”

If it is objected that we are bid to go to hear those who sit in Moses’ chair (Matt. 23:2–3), I would answer this, in the words of a body of dissenting ministers: “Sitting in Moses’ chair” signifies a succeeding of Moses in the ordinary part of his office and authority; so did Joshua and the 70 elders (Exod. 18:21–26). Now, Moses was no priest (say they) though of Levi’s tribe, but king in Jeshurun, a civil ruler and judge, chosen by God (Exod. 18:13).” Therefore, no more is meant by the Scripture in the objection but that it is the duty of people to hear and obey the lawful commands of the civil magistrate, according to Romans 13:5.

If it is opposed to the preceding reasonings that such an opinion and practice would be apt to cause heats and contentions among people, I answer that the aforesaid practice, accompanied with love, meekness, and humility, is not the proper cause of those divisions, but the occasion only, or the cause by accident, and not by itself. If a person, exercising modesty and love in his

carriage to his minister and neighbors, through up-rightness of heart, designing nothing but his own greater good, repairs there frequently where he attains it, is this any reasonable cause of anger? Will any be offended with him because he loves his soul and seeks the greater good thereof, and is not like a senseless stone, without choice, sense, and taste?

Must we leave off every duty that is the occasion of contention or division? Then we must quit powerful religion altogether, for he who will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution. And particularly, we must carefully avoid faithful preaching, for that is wont to occasion disturbances and divisions, especially when accompanied with divine power. First Thessalonians 1:5–6: “Our gospel came not unto you in Word only, but in power,” and then it is added that they “received the Word in much affliction.” And, the Apostle Paul informs us in 1 Corinthians 16:9 that a great door, and an effectual one, was opened unto him, and that there were many adversaries. Blessed Paul was accounted a common disturber of the peace as well as Elijah long before him, and yet he left not off preaching for all that. Yea, our blessed Lord informs us that He came not to send peace on earth, but rather a sword, variance, fire, and division, and that even among relations (Matt. 10:34–36; Luke 12:49, 51–53). And also, while the strong man armed keeps the house, all the goods are in peace.

It is true, the power of the gospel is not the proper cause of those divisions, but the innocent occasion only. No, the proper and selfish lusts are the proper cause of those divisions. And very often natural men, who are the proper causes of the divisions aforesaid, are wont to deal with God’s servants as Potiphar’s wife did by Joseph; they lay all the blame of their own wickedness at their doors, and make a loud cry!

Such as confine opposition and division, as following living godliness and successful preaching, to the first ages of Christianity, it is much to be feared, neither know themselves nor the gospel of Christ. For surely the nature of true religion, as well as of men and devils, is the same in every age.

Is not the visible church composed of persons of the most contrary characters? While some are sincere servants of God, are not many servants of Satan under a religious mask? And have not these

a fixed enmity against the other? How is it then possible that a harmony should subsist between such till their nature is changed? Can light dwell with darkness?

Undoubtedly, it is a great duty to avoid giving just cause of offence to any; and it is also highly necessary that pious souls should maintain union and harmony among themselves, notwithstanding their different opinions in lesser things. And, no doubt, this is the drift of the many exhortations which we have to peace and unity in Scripture.

Surely, it cannot be reasonably supposed that we are exhorted to a unity in anything that is wicked or inconsistent with the good, or greater good, of our poor souls; for that would be like the unity of the devils, a legion of which dwelt peaceably in one man. Or it would be like the unity of Ahab’s false prophets; all these four hundred daubers were very peaceable and much united, and all harped on the pleasing string. Aye, they were moderate men, and had the majority on their side.

But, possibly, some may again object to persons going to hear others besides their own ministers. They may use the Scripture about Paul and Apollos from 1 Corinthians 1:12, and say that it is carnal. Dr. Voetius answers the aforesaid objection as follows: ‘The apostle reproves such as made sects, saying, ‘I am of Paul, and I of Apollos,’ and we, with him, reprove them. But this is far from being against the choice which one has of sermons and preachers; seeing at one time we cannot hear all, neither does the explication and application of all equally suit such a person in such a time or condition, or equally quicken and subserve the increase of knowledge.’

Because of that, the apostle, in the aforesaid place, reproves an excessive love to, or admiration of, particular ministers accompanied with a sinful contention, slighting, and disdain of others who are truly godly, and with sect-making. To say that from hence it necessarily follows that we must make no difference in our choice, or in the degrees of our esteem of different ministers according to their different gifts and graces, is an argument of as great force as to say that, because gluttony and drunkenness are forbidden; therefore, we must neither eat, nor drink, or make any choice in drinks or victuals, let our constitution be what it will.

Surely the very nature of Christian love inclines those that are possessed of it to love others chiefly for their goodness and, therefore, in proportion thereto. Now, seeing the inference in the objection is secretly built upon this supposition, that we should love all good men alike, it strikes at the foundation of that love to the brethren which is laid down in Scripture as a mark of true Christianity (1 John 5), and so is carnal with a witness.

Again, it may be objected that the aforesaid practice tends to grieve our parish-minister, and to break congregations in pieces.

I answer, if our parish-minister is grieved at our greater good, or prefers his credit before it, then he has good cause to grieve over his own rottenness and hypocrisy. And as for breaking congregations to pieces upon the account of people's going from place to place to hear the Word with a view to getting greater good, that spiritual blindness and death that so generally prevails will put this out of danger. It is but a very few that have gotten any spiritual relish. The most will venture their souls with any formalist, and be well satisfied with the sapless discourses of such dead drones.

Well, doesn't the apostle assert that Paul and Apollos are nothing? Yes, it is true, they and all others are nothing as efficient causes; they could not change men's hearts, but were they nothing as instruments? The objection insinuates one of these two things: either that there is no difference in means, as to their suitability, or that there is no reason to expect a greater blessing upon the most suitable means; both which are equally absurd and have already been confuted.

But it may be further objected, with great appearance of zeal, that what has been said about people's getting of good, or greater good, over their parish-line is mere fiction, for they are out of God's way.

I answer that there are three monstrous ingredients in the objection: namely, a begging of the question in debate, rash judging, and limiting of God.

It is a mean thing in reasoning to beg or suppose that which should be proved, and then to reason from it. Let it be proved that they are out of God's way, and then I will freely yield; but, till

this is done, bold "Say-sos" will not have much weight with any but dupes or dunces. And for such as cry out against others for uncharitableness to be guilty of it themselves, in the meantime, in a very great degree, is very inconsistent. Isn't it rash to judge things they have never heard? But those that have received benefit, and are sensible of their own uprightness, will think it is a light thing to be judged of man's judgment. Let Tertullus ascend the theatre, and gild the objection with the most mellifluous Ciceronian eloquence; it will no more persuade them that what they have felt is but a fancy (unless they are under strong temptations of Satan, or scared out of their wits by frightful expressions) than to tell a man, in proper language, that sees that it is but a notion, that he does not see; or to tell a man that feels pleasure or pain that it's but a deluded fancy. They are quite mistaken.

Besides, there is a limiting the Holy One of Israel in the aforesaid objection, which sinful sin the Hebrews were reproved for. It is a piece of daring presumption to pretend, by our finite line, to fathom the infinite depths that are in the being and works of God. The query of Zophar is just and reasonable from Job 11:7-8: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" The humble apostle, with astonishment, acknowledged that the ways of God were past finding out (Rom. 1:33). Surely the wind blows where it will, and we cannot tell whence it comes, nor whither it goes. Doesn't Jehovah ride upon a gloomy cloud, and make darkness His pavilion? And isn't His path in the great waters (Ps. 77:19)?

I would conclude my present meditations upon this subject by exhorting all those who enjoy a faithful ministry to a speedy and sincere improvement of so rare and valuable a privilege lest, by their foolish ingratitude, the righteous God is provoked to remove the means they enjoy, or His blessing from them, and so at last to expose them in another state to enduring and greater miseries. For surely, their sins which are committed against greater light and mercy are more presumptuous, ungrateful, and inexcusable. There is in them a greater contempt of God's authority and slight of His mercy. Those evils awfully violate the conscience, and declare a love to sin as sin. Such transgressors rush upon the bosses of God's buckler, they court destruction

without a covering and embrace their won ruin with open arms. And, therefore, according to the nature of justice, which proportions sinner's pains, according to the number and heinousness of their crimes, and the declaration of Divine truth, you must expect an enflamed damnation. Surely, it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of the Lord than for you, except you repent.

And let gracious souls be exhorted to express the most tender pity over such as have none but Pharisee-teachers; and that in the manner before described. To which let the example of our Lord in the text before us be an inducing and effectual incitement, as well as the gracious and immense rewards which follow upon so generous and noble a charity in this and the next state.

And let those who live under the ministry of dead men, whether they have the form of religion or not, repair to the living where they may be edified. Let who will oppose it. What famous Mr. Dudley Fenner observed upon this head is most just, "If there be any godly soul, or any that desires the salvation of his soul, and lives under a blind guide, he cannot go out (of his parish) without giving very great offence; it will be thought a giddiness, and a slighting of his own minister at home. When people came out of every parish roundabout to John, no question but this bred heart-burning against John, aye, and ill-will against those people that would not be satisfied with that teaching they had in their own synagogues."

But though your neighbors growl against you, and reproach you for doing your duty, in seeking your soul's good, bear their unjust censures with Christian meekness and persevere, knowing that suffering is the lot of Christ's followers, and that spiritual benefits infinitely overbalance all temporal difficulties.

And, oh, that vacant congregations would take due care in the choice of their ministers! Here, indeed, they should hasten slowly. The

church of Ephesus is commended for trying them who said they were Apostles and were not, and for finding them liars. Hypocrites are against all knowing of others, and judging in order to hide their own filthiness; like thieves they flee a search because of the stolen goods. But the more they endeavor to hide, the more they expose their shame.

Does not the spiritual man judge all things? Though he cannot know the states of subtle hypocrites infallibly, yet may he not give a near guess as to who are the sons of Sceva, by their manner of praying, preaching, and living? Many Pharisee-teachers have got a long fine string of prayer by heart, so that they are never at a loss about it. Their prayers and preachings are generally of a length, and both as dead as a stone, and without all savor.

I beseech you, my dear brethren, to consider that there is no probability of your getting good by the ministry of Pharisees, for they are no shepherds (no faithful ones) in Christ's account. They are as good as none, nay, worse than none upon some account. For take them first and last, and they generally do more hurt than good. They strive to keep better out of the places where they live; nay, when the life of piety comes near their quarters, they rise up in arms against it, consult, contrive, and combine in their conclaves against it as a common enemy that reveals and condemns their craft and hypocrisy. And with what art, rhetoric, and appearances of piety, will they varnish their opposition of Christ's kingdom? As the magicians imitated the works of Moses, so do false apostles, and deceitful workers imitate the apostles of Christ.

I shall conclude the discourse with the words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 11:14-15: "And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light: Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."

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