

**A PLEA FOR MINISTERIAL LIBERTY: A
DISCOURSE ADDRESSED, BY APPOINTMENT,
TO THE DIRECTORS AND STUDENTS
OF THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, AT PRINCETON, ON
THE 17TH OF MAY, 1824, PP. 1-55**

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A Plea for Ministerial Liberty: A Discourse Addressed, by appointment, to the Directors and Students of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, At Princeton, on the 17th of May, 1824, pp. 1-55 by John M. Duncan

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JOHN M. DUNCAN

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DIRECTORS AND STUDENTS

OF THE

Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church,

AT PRINCETON,

ON THE 17TH OF MAY, 1824.

BY JOHN M. DUNCAN,

Pastor of the Associate Reformed Congregation of Baltimore.

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DISCOURSE.

For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, wo is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!

For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me.

What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law;

To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker thereof with you. Know ye not, that they which run in a race, run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.

And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.

I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away.

1 Cor. ix. 16—27.

THE Apostle has explicitly asserted, that this part of his Epistle to the Corinthian Christians, receives its peculiar form from a letter addressed by them to him, referring certain matters about which they differed to his apostolic judgment. One of these involved the broad question of Christian liberty; or inquired into the use that might be made of an abstract right, which affected no essential principle, or, at most, only the

application of essential principle to things indifferent in themselves. The case appears to have comprised the following particulars: "We know that an idol is nothing in the world; and that meat offered in sacrifice to an idol, cannot thereby be polluted. Moreover, we know, that the new economy has entirely modified evangelic institutions: altered the extent of connecting divine and human things together, in the arrangement of religious ordinances; and restored to us, by virtue of our union with 'the heir of all things,' the free and indiscriminate use of earthly creatures, agreeably to the grant originally given in Paradise. These things being true, are we culpable in partaking of a public feast, prepared in an idol's temple? May we not accept the invitation of an unbeliever to a private entertainment, when such meat is presented on the table, without contracting guilt? Or, going to the market to provide food for our households, is there any peril in purchasing this meat, if offered for sale?" Questions of conscience, which, considering the religious knowledge of the age, and the character of the temptations under which they occurred, were certainly not framed without considerable ingenuity; and even now, though ours be the age of philosophic theology, the same principle called up into discussion, and modified in its forms to correspond with the change of circumstances, might puzzle the majority of professing Christians. For we are still fond of arguing questions of abstract right, frequently not hesitating to estimate piety by the amount of controversial zeal, and throwing lines of circumvallation around, not only each other's personal liberty, but around Christ's ordinances themselves.

The Apostle, leaving the particular cases for future discussion, on which he professedly enters in the tenth chapter, for the present contents himself with showing them that their argument was defective, as they had omitted several circumstances, materially important to a correct decision. In the first place, says he, "meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat, are we the better, neither if we eat not, are

we the worse. This were enough one would think, to annihilate the whole difficulty. What Christian, whose mind is enlarged, or whose heart is mellowed, could be very strenuous in an argument about a matter of such microscopic dimensions? In the second place, "every man has not that knowledge" of which you boast; and they, who, without this knowledge, eat of this meat, do it with conscience of the idol; they eat it as meat, offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak, is defiled. For, as he informed the Romans, in a parallel argument on the same subject, "to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean:—happy is the man who condemneth not himself in the thing that he alloweth; and he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he catcheth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin." (Rom. xiv.) Observe, he continues, the operation of these things; the knowledge of which you boast, is conceded to you, by many of your Christian brethren, who are thence led to infer your ability to instruct them. What then, if one of these should see you, men of large spiritual attainments, sit at meat in an idol's temple: his conscience judges this to be the extreme of social intercourse, and cannot discriminate between you and the idolater himself. Yet the temptation may be fascinating; the occasion for festivity and mirth may very strongly allure; your example will embolden his conscience; and he may enter the idol's temple, which, but for you, he never would have done, and join in the ceremony he considers idolatrous; thus publicly allowing the very thing in which he condemns himself. The conclusion of the whole is, "through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died." O, surely this were enough to startle any man, who was not drudging out a heartless profession under the infatuation of some soul-destroying passion; enough to awaken every sensibility of the Christian spirit, and reveal its accurate resemblance to the master himself. Each one would retire from the idol's temple, singing "hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down

his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

Paul, the intrepid Paul, he whose labors were so abundant, and whose stripes had scathed his body with the marks of the Lord Jesus; who spake with tongues more than they all; whose eyes had seen the beauty, and whose ears had heard the music of God’s heavenly habitation; Paul, while he states the particulars of his delightful theme, feels the glow of that rapturing love, which had already carried him through such variety of scene in his Master’s service; and declares for himself, “if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”

These are not mere words of course, on the part of the Apostle. No man could speak more confidently of works of benevolence, rendered with a cheerful and untiring spirit, than he. The biographic sketch of his ministerial career, is one continued strain of exalted eulogy, if in such eulogy any man may indulge before the Lord. Hear his appeal. You know, says he, to the Corinthians, my right to a pecuniary compensation for my labors among you.—A right I can rest upon my apostolic office, as being a distinct vocation in human society; upon the peculiar fact of our spiritual relation, constituted by the exercise of that office among you, ye being the seal of my apostleship in the Lord: upon the constitutional principles of society, sustained in all the transactions of life, as I have labored for your interest, not as a slave whom you may control, but as a free-man who has equal rights with yourselves; upon natural law, applying itself even to beasts of burden, requiring for their toil in your service, a righteous provision; upon the known statute in the church through past ages; upon the common practice of the other apostles; upon a fair comparison of the character of my labors with that of the recompense I might claim;—It is impossible you should dispute my right. Yet you know I have not asserted my right; cheerfully have I waived it hitherto for the gospel’s sake; and even now,

I will suffer no man to snatch from me the comfort I derive from this recollection. In this I glory: and "it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void; as the truth of Christ is in me, no man shall stop me of this boasting in the regions of Achaia."

Here, the verses, at present under consideration, take up the subject. And we are, in analysing them, called upon to develop some moral principles, characteristic of the evangelical institute, which are deeply interesting to all Christians, whatever relations they may sustain to the church or the world: principles, which embrace the personal objects of their *glorying*, as required to individualize each one himself from all other human beings, and to estimate his own responsibilities as covering all that is peculiar in the sphere in which he may move, or in the service he may personally render.

16. *For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, wo is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!*

Paul is plainly speaking for himself. The circumstances he details are purely personal, and are not to be applied, with an arbitrary uniformity, to every minister of the gospel. His object is, to define with precision his own example, and to prevent the Corinthians from mistaking his meaning, when he would illustrate his views on the subject of personal liberty, by tracing them out as most considerately and affectionately exemplified in his own ministerial deportment.

It is not the right to preach the gospel, he waives. In such a case he would have gone out of the sphere of his personal will, into acts of pure licentiousness, and converted a question of absolute duty into a mere matter of individual liberty. And that would have been a dereliction in evangelical morals, very far below him, who was always ready to be offered upon the sacrifice and service of the faith of his spiritual children. He very distinctly declares, that any right he might have to resolve the exercise of the ministerial office