

**A DISCOURSE DELIVERED
IN HARVARD CHURCH,
CHARLESTOWN**

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A discourse delivered in Harvard church, Charlestown by James Walker

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JAMES WALKER

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DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

HARVARD CHURCH, CHARLESTOWN,

JULY 14, 1839,

ON

TAKING LEAVE OF HIS SOCIETY.

By JAMES WALKER.

PRINTED BY REQUEST, FOR THE USE OF THE SOCIETY.

CAMBRIDGE:

METCALF, TORRY, AND BALLOU.

1839.

A. M. Lincoln

DISCOURSE.

PHILIPPIANS I. 27, 28. Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ; that, whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel; and in nothing terrified by your adversaries.

You will bear me witness, my friends, that I have never sought opportunities to thrust myself or my own affairs into the pulpit, or to trouble you with what troubled me. Even now, deeply as I am affected by the thought of the approaching dissolution of my pastoral connexions with this society, I am not certain that, if I were to consult my own inclinations solely, I should allude to the subject here. The custom, however, of delivering farewell discourses on occasions like the present has so much foundation in reason and nature, that to depart from it altogether would neither be wise nor respectful. But, to foreclose expectations which are not likely to be gratified, let me make two remarks in the outset. As I propose to limit my observations almost exclusively to a hasty glance at the past history and the future prospects of this society, they

can hardly be of any interest, except to those who belong to the society. And even in regard to them, as I do not feel as if I were going to such a distance as precludes the probability of my seeing and addressing them frequently hereafter, there would be no consistency in my addressing them now, as if it were for the last time. Of course there will be no occasion for those appeals to the sensibility, or those bursts of feeling, in which discourses of this kind are apt to abound.

Let us first look back on the way we have gone over together.

The history of this society, as you are aware, is almost spanned by my single ministry. It was incorporated by an act of the General Court, bearing date, February 9, 1816. Several events of the preceding year had prepared the way for it. In the first place, a public appeal had been made to the Orthodox Congregationalists of New England, calling on them to "come out and be separate" from those suspected of Unitarianism; and this was followed up by a suspension of the liberal system of ministerial exchanges which had prevailed until then, and by other measures tending to deprive Unitarians of the name and privileges of Christians. Whatever we may now think of the wisdom and justice of that step, it is certain that many, who were but little conversant with the theological questions in dispute, regarded the whole movement at the time, as harsh, ungracious, and precipitate, and the consequence was that either a majority, or

a large and respectable minority, of almost every Congregational society in this vicinity, declared for the liberal side, in the controversy which grew out of it. (Again, the peace with England, which took place about the same time, had something to do with the gathering of this church. That event, it will be recollected, had the effect to produce a general amnesty in regard to political differences; so that nothing was left of the estrangements originating in political causes to hinder those, who thought and felt alike on the subject of religion, from coming together and acting in concert.) Precisely at this juncture, also, a church, the one now occupied by the Methodists, was offered for sale by the administrator of the estate of the late Mr. Harrison, into whose hands it had fallen. This was a coincidence, — may I not say, providence, — of which the liberal Congregationalists, (who were in the minority here, but who constituted a large and respectable minority,) were not slow to avail themselves; and the church, accordingly, was bought, repaired, and opened for worship on the 9th of May, 1816.

I mention these circumstances, so creditable to the founders of this society, because it shows that they acted under the influence of public considerations alone, and not from private pique or local difficulties or misunderstandings of any kind. Not a step was taken by them which was not in entire consistency with respect and friendship for the First Church, from which most of them withdrew; and thus they began that state of good feeling be-

tween this society, and all the other religious societies in the town, which, I am most happy in saying, has been cordially cherished and reciprocated from that time to the present. /

Their first minister, Mr. Thomas Prentiss, was ordained March 26, 1817. To a sound mind and singular amenity of temper he united that devotedness to his profession, which makes it as certain as anything of this nature can be, that, if he had lived, he would soon have gathered around him a large and prosperous congregation. / But it was otherwise appointed in the inscrutable counsels of heaven. He was here but little more than six months. After a distressing illness of eleven days, contracted, as it was supposed, in the over assiduous discharge of his pastoral duties, he departed this life on Sunday morning, the 5th of October.

My ordination took place, April 15, 1818. Of the ninety-five families, who then constituted the society, only thirty-three remain; meanwhile the whole number has gradually grown with the growth of the town, to about two hundred and twenty-five families.

The location of the old church being early objected to, as not sufficiently accessible to the bulk of the population, it was this circumstance, and not a want of room, or dissatisfaction with the house itself, which soon directed the attention of the proprietors to the expediency of building another. / The site of the edifice in which we are now assembled was finally agreed upon, as the result of an

amicable compromise ; the necessary funds were subscribed, and the work commenced in the spring of 1818 ; and on the 10th of February of the following year, the whole was completed, and dedicated with the customary religious solemnities ; the cost, including that of the land and an organ, being nearly twenty-eight thousand dollars. In 1833, the interior of the church underwent thorough repairs, at an expense of about two thousand dollars more ; the aisles being then carpeted for the first time, a new pulpit built, and a better and more expensive organ obtained in exchange for the one formerly owned by the society.)

For the present large and fine-toned bell we are chiefly indebted to a liberal bequest of the late Hon. Timothy Walker, who also gave the clock. The donors of the chandelier, and of the service of plate for the communion table, are still living to prevent a more explicit acknowledgment of these benefactions. I take a peculiar pleasure in noticing such acts of liberality on the part of wealthy individuals, because it affords me an opportunity to express a hope, that the practice of endowing churches, once carried to excess, and on superstitious grounds, will never be allowed to fall into the opposite extreme of indifference and neglect. Nothing, certainly, can be more natural and becoming, than a disposition, on the part of those whom God has prospered in their worldly affairs beyond what is common, to testify a sense of his bounty by thus recording their names among the friends and benefactors of their

accustomed places of worship. There are also two considerations, which make the suggestion peculiarly pertinent in this country, and at this time. The plan, now so common, and gradually becoming universal, of supporting religious institutions by a tax on pews, and not on property, makes the poor pay about as much as the rich towards the current expenses, notwithstanding the great difference in their ability, and notwithstanding they have so much less at stake, the safety of which is dependent on the indirect influences of these institutions in sustaining public order, and the public morals. To the plan itself I do not object, on the whole. Doubtless, in the existing state of things, it is a better plan than the old one. Still, so much the more ground is afforded for an earnest appeal to the generosity of the opulent members of the community, that they may do what they can, by bequest or otherwise, to rectify the obviously unequal action, in some respects, of the present system. Add to this the rapid extension amongst us of the voluntary principle, as it is called, occasioned by the repeal of those laws which made it legally obligatory on every individual to pay his proportion somewhere towards the support of religious worship. Here again, however, let me observe, that, in view of all the circumstances of the case, I do not regret the repeal of those laws. In the existing state of public opinion they were not, and they could not be, enforced; so that giving them a place in the statute-book any longer, could only serve to irritate