



Yours aff^l Brother in Christ
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RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE

REV. JOHN McELHENNEY, D. D.

BY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER,

ROSE W. FRY.

“O good gray head which all men knew.”

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APPENDIX.

A SERMON

DELIVERED AT THE FIRST MEETING OF THE GREENBRIER
PRESBYTERY.*

“In the name of our God we will set up our banners.”—PSALM
xx., middle clause of the 5th verse.

THIS psalm was written immediately before David engaged in conflict with the Ammonites and Syrians. It is the prayer of Israel for the success of their king in this perilous undertaking.

No words could be better suited to our particular situation than these. True, we are not about to engage in a perilous conflict. But we have been recently formed into a presbytery. Our field of labor has been assigned us—a field not only large, but one that presents more than ordinary difficulties. But if we can, from the heart, adopt the spirit of this psalm; if we do indeed feel that our strength is alone in God; if we go forth under his special direction and protection, then may we be assured, that “in the name of our God we will set up our banners.”

In the further treatment of these words I shall pursue the following order:

I. Notice some of the difficulties with which we will have to contend in setting up our banners in this region of country.

*This sermon was published in pamphlet form, by request of the presbytery before whom it was preached by Dr. McElhenney, at Lewisburg (now in West Virginia), April 12, 1838.

II. The means which, under God, we must use to accomplish this end.

III. By way of appendix, give you a concise view of the rise of Presbyterianism in this region which we propose to occupy.

Before I proceed to these points I shall say a word by way of explanation.

To set up a banner, flag, or ensign, generally implies that possession is taken of that country, town, or city where this is done, and that they are brought under subjection to another power. This is the sense in which the word is used in the text. But we wish it understood that, so far as other Christian denominations are concerned, this is not the sense in which we use the term; that we do not present ourselves in the character of Presbyterians, supposing that, as a matter of right, we are to occupy this extensive region to the exclusion of all others. No, we assume no such prerogative. We love our own church. We prefer it to every other. We believe that in doctrine and order it is nearer to the apostolic model than any other portion of the visible church. But we do not believe that the visible church is confined to the limits of our denomination, and that we alone have authority from the Head of the church to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances. Nor would we place even the least obstacle in the way of others. We would most cordially take them by the hand and say, We bid you God-speed in the common cause.

But to return to the first point deduced from the text, which was to notice some of the difficulties with which we will have to contend in setting up our banner in this region of country:

That the gospel may be preached to lost sinners, and that the great object of the ministry may be accomplished, each individual member, every church, minister, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly have their peculiar part to act. They have their field

of operations, through which they must pass, and which they must cultivate, that it may bring forth fruit unto God. They stand as so many detached parties to prepare the way for the general spread of the gospel, and as instruments to bring about that day when it shall be preached to all nations, kindreds, and tongues, and peoples.

We, as a presbytery, have had our field marked out. The Synod of Virginia has said to us, You shall occupy a portion of this State which lies west of the Alleghany Mountains. And now it is not a matter of option with us whether we shall occupy it or not. It is not a matter of mere convenience with us, but a matter of sacred and solemn obligation. The duty which we owe God; the duty which we owe the church, ourselves, and others, imperiously demands that we should endeavor in the strength of our God to set up our banner here.

That we have undertaken a work of no ordinary magnitude will appear from taking a view of the field itself.

The region over which we are called to exercise a Presbyterian influence is in extent not less than one hundred and fifty miles square, containing a population of probably more than one hundred thousand souls, not generally collected into dense settlements, but scattered along the rivers, creeks, and rivulets which wind their way among the lofty mountains with which they are surrounded.

To accomplish the object we have in view, and to comply with our obligations to the Head of the church, we must not only calculate upon bringing the gospel to bear upon those who live in the thickly populated settlements, and where congregations are already organized, but upon those who are scattered over the whole region. Look at the huge and numerous mountains which lie in the way, many of which are almost impassable. Look also at the many bold and rapid

streams which pass among them, and bear in mind that not a few of those to whom we are bound to preach the gospel live along the margin of these waters, which are often both difficult and dangerous to cross, and you can at once see that we have undertaken to accomplish a task of no ordinary character.

But the obstacles which the situation of the country presents are not the only, nor are they the main, difficulties with which we will have to contend. There are others greater than these. Not only will we have to contend with the pride of the natural heart, and the opposition to the gospel, which are characteristics of fallen man, but, in some places, with no small amount of prejudice against Presbyterianism. Not a few view it as a system of fatalism, alike derogatory to the character of God, and subversive of man's accountability; or they have been taught to consider it as only another name for infidelity. But, however strong these prejudices may be, I have never yet known them to have so firm a hold upon the mind that they will not, in a great measure, if not entirely, give way when the doctrines which are taught in the Confession of Faith, which we believe, and which we preach, are plainly presented to any people. They are very different from the caricatures of Presbyterianism which are too often exhibited by those who differ with us in doctrine.

But if we had no such prejudices to encounter, still the doctrines of grace which we preach have always been offensive to the world. When they were taught by our Saviour and his apostles, they were violently opposed, and such has been the conduct of the world in all ages. The reason of this is plain: They stand directly opposed to the pride of the natural heart, to the workings of the old man of sin in the soul. The world does not object to a system of religion which fosters the pride of the natural heart. It does not object to a system of religion which will bend to the spirit of this world, which will indulge in a full par-

icipation of all its amusements and pleasures. But a religion which points the sinner to his miserable and lost condition; which shows him that he is dead under the law—dead to all holy affection to God, and justly exposed to his everlasting displeasure;—a religion which has God for its author; which requires deep conviction of sin, evangelical sorrow for it, and an entire turning from it to God; which presses on the sinner holiness of heart and life, is one against which the corrupt heart will always revolt. As, then, we preach the doctrines of total depravity; the sinner's inability; regeneration by the free and unmerited grace of God; justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; that faith is the gift of God; that the work of sanctification is carried on in the heart of the believer by the Spirit of God; that every true believer will persevere to the end; and that God has all the glory in the salvation of the sinner, we have to contend with no ordinary amount of opposition from the corruptions of the natural heart. But at this we are not to be surprised, when we know that these corruptions stand directly opposed to the whole gospel plan. Nor are we to be discouraged from preaching the truth; for, however strong and powerful this opposition may be, it can be made to fall by the sword of the Spirit. Whose opposition could be greater, or whose prejudices stronger, than were those of Paul? Yet how soon were they subdued by the grace of God!

Such are some of the difficulties with which we will have to contend in "setting up our banner" in this region of country.

II. I come now to the second thing proposed, which is, to explain a little, the means we must use to accomplish this end.

Means are ordinarily a part of God's plan in the salvation of sinners; consequently no calculations can be made that they will be saved without them. But it is the spirit with which they are used, which, under

God, gives them their efficacy. Unless they be used in the name and in the strength of our God—unless they be accompanied with an humble dependence upon him, and with submission to his holy will—they will not avail. The more completely we are stripped of every shadow of self-dependence in the use of the means, and trust alone to the arm of Heaven to aid us, the more certain we will be to succeed. This was David's hold. This was his strength when he engaged in an unequal contest with the Ammonites and Syrians. They trusted to idols to give them victory, but he trusted to the God of Israel, by whom he triumphed. But that eye which watched over David, and that arm which strengthened him, can alone crown our efforts with success. And just so far as he is with us, so far will we succeed in "setting up our banner" in opposition to all prejudices and false opinions which may exist in this region; and so far will we see sinners, through our humble instrumentality, brought to bow at the foot of the cross.

Laying this down as a fundamental point from which we must never deviate, I proceed to mention some of the means which we must use to effect the end we have in view:

1. We must preach the gospel—by which I mean the whole truth; a plain exposition of the distinguishing doctrines of grace; the plain, practical principles of the Bible—in the plain, unsophisticated manner in which it is presented in this book.

It is well known that strong prejudices exist in the minds of not a few against some points in theology which, we believe, are contained in the Bible: such as the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity; the sovereignty of God; his electing love in the salvation of the sinner; and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Some, in order to avoid coming in contact with those prejudices, have, when expounding the gospel, measurably left these points out of

view, although they admit that they are essentially connected with the divine plan. But how can this course be reconciled with truth and the conscience? How can it be reconciled with the matter of fact, that we are to declare the whole counsel of God?

But there are others who, whilst they do not fail to present these doctrines to the minds of their hearers, yet endeavor to explain them so as to make them more palatable; to make them conform more to the prejudices of the world, and, if possible, to allay their opposition, and have evidently explained them away altogether. We have no doubt that this is one way in which so much error has got into the church in this day.

It is entirely a mistaken idea to suppose that truth and religion can be promoted by accommodating them to the prejudices of the world; and that minister of Jesus Christ who endeavors to do this, does just so much to destroy the truth of the Bible, and the saving influences of religion on the hearts of impenitent sinners. The question with us is not, What will suit the prejudices of the world; but, What does the Bible say? What has God revealed? And whatever these are, we must preach them, whether the world will hear or whether they will forbear. Nor have we the least evidence to believe that our preaching will be successful in any other way. God is truth: his word is truth; and nothing but truth will ever succeed in the salvation of sinners.

2. In the second place, in order that we may effect the grand object we have in view, each member of this presbytery must measurably assume the character of a missionary. He must not calculate on spending his time exclusively in one or two congregations; but he must calculate upon making frequent excursions into destitute places. He must be willing to bear all the self-denial which will be necessary in leaving his own people, and encounter the fatigue which will be necessary that the gospel may be preached in every destitute part.

My brethren in the ministry, that we may engage with pleasure and usefulness in this arduous work, we must have our minds strongly impressed with the value of the souls whose salvation we seek. Indeed, nothing can give a more powerful stimulant to ministerial effort, than for the mind to act under the constant impression "that it will profit a man nothing if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul"; and yet, "that it pleaseth God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." With these two ideas before the mind, shall we fear the labor? Or shall we fear success, when the great Head of the church has promised, "Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world"?

I am aware that a difficulty may arise in the minds of some from this view of the subject. It may appear to be directly opposed to the solemn contract which exists between pastor and people, in which each party agrees to comply with the terms therein stipulated. If we estimate the value of preaching by dollars and cents, then would there be a violation of contract. But if we calculate from the good it may do, then is there no violation of contract, as the engagement from its very nature implies that the congregation should, for a short time, yield up the labors of their pastor, if it be probable that they will be more useful elsewhere. Add to this, if a minister be influenced by the proper spirit; if his heart be filled with the love of souls; if he feels an ardent desire to promote the interest of the Redeemer's kingdom, then may he do much of this labor through the week, and lose but few Sabbaths from his people.

3. In the third place, missionaries must be employed, who will make it their exclusive business to preach in those destitute places. The success which has attended this method of giving the gospel to the destitute gives it a preëminence over every other. It has been the means in the hand of God of doing much

good. As a proof of this we have only to look at those flourishing churches in the West, many of which were organized by missionaries. Others, when weak and unable to support a pastor, were supplied by missionaries until they became able.

And there is no region in this vast valley, in which missionaries are more needed, and will be longer necessary, than within the bounds of this presbytery. The scattered state of the population in many places, and the impossibility from the situation of the country that it should ever be otherwise, render it improbable, not to say impossible, that they should ever be formed into such congregations as will be able to support a minister. And this is true, even upon the supposition that the people were generally inclined to Presbyterianism, which is by no means the case.

One main object, then, with this presbytery, must be to support missionaries. But the question arises, how is this to be done? A brief calculation will answer this question, and show that we can with ease sustain not less than two missionaries constantly in the field. Let each member of the churches pay annually twenty-five cents to this object. This, with the aid which we have a right to expect from the Board of Missions of the General Assembly, and the amount which can with ease be collected in the missionary field, will furnish a support to two or more missionaries, in constant service. Have we not a right to expect that our churches will heartily cooperate with us in the work? Will they not do more than, according to this calculation, they are called on to do?

4. But the fourth and last thing that I shall mention on this point, is a punctual attendance of the members on the meetings of presbytery. Some may suppose that this can have but little influence in accomplishing the object we have in view; but, upon examination, it will be found to be a matter of vital importance. In all circumstances this is a most binding duty; and,

as I understand our ordination vows, they place us under the most solemn obligations not to neglect it.

But if this be true in the general, it is still more important in our case. We are but few at best. Even the absence of one member will be felt. But the absence of a few will reduce us to a mere fraction. Then we will lose that weight of influence which we might otherwise have. The world will very much judge of our cause from the character which we as a presbytery sustain. And I shall despair of ever seeing the Presbyterian banner set up in this region should this duty be neglected.

Some seem to suppose that, as the business of the church can be done without them, it is only time and labor lost to attend her judicatories. To say nothing of the sacred obligation which rests upon every minister, and on every elder in his turn, to attend these meetings, it is an entirely mistaken idea that it is time and labor lost. Time in the general cannot be better spent. The interview which we have with one another; the sermons we hear preached; the interchange of sentiment and feelings in transacting the business of the church; and the united prayers which ascend to the throne of grace, all tend to enliven and animate the soul. And it not unfrequently occurs that the ministers and elders return home under a quickened influence, which is imparted to their respective congregations, and thus both pastor and people are benefited. This is not an imaginary representation, but a matter of practical understanding. If, then, we study our own interest, the interest of our people, and of the church at large; if we wish in the strength of our God to set up our banner, we must be punctual in attending the judicatories of the church.

Such, then, are some of the means we must use, in order that we may have the unspeakable pleasure of seeing the cause of God prospering through our instrumentality, and that we may be instrumental in setting up our banner.

III. But this leads me to the third thing proposed, which is, by way of appendix, to give you a brief view of the rise and progress of Presbyterianism in this region, where we propose to set up our banner. Here it will be distinctly understood as being no part of my design to enter into a detail of the rise and progress of particular congregations, but simply to state a few things in general connected with this subject.

I have not been able to procure a single record or document which will throw even the least ray of light on the subject before me. It is not, then, to be presumed that I shall be able, with accuracy, to state the facts. All I can do is to state what I have collected from aged persons yet living, who, when young, were conversant with the first settlement of this country.

So far as can be ascertained, the first white person visited these western waters in 1749, but no attempt was made to settle the country until 1760. The first settlement was mainly made on Muddy Creek, in this county, which was entirely cut off by the Indians in the year 1763. Whether the gospel was ever preached among these first settlers, or what were their religious opinions, I have not been able to ascertain. It was not before the year 1769 that a resettlement commenced. These second adventurers emigrated mainly from the Valley, in this State. They were all inclined to Presbyterianism, and some of them were members in the church. There is an old lady now living in the county of Monroe, nearly or quite one hundred years of age, who was among this number, and who was a professor of religion when she came into the country, and who, for more than eighty years, has manifested the life and power of religion in all her walk and conversation before the world. Being, not long since, asked if she regretted that she had embraced religion at so early a period in her life, her whole soul seemed to wake up, and she exclaimed: "Regret it! No. If I had a thousand years to spend upon this earth, I

would wish to spend them all in the service of my God.”

Soon after the settlement commenced, missionaries were sent into the country. The first, so far as can be ascertained, was a Mr. Crawford, who, it is believed, came from the South Branch of the Potomac. The names of Frazer, Read, and others, are mentioned, but of them we know nothing. There are persons now living who attribute their conversion to the instrumentality of those missionaries, and who, for more than sixty years, have proved faithful soldiers of the cross, and who have, indeed, been as burning and shining lights before the world.

As much danger was apprehended from the Indians at that time, the people were collected generally into forts, throughout this whole region of country. One of these stood on the spot where Lewisburg now stands, and but a few paces from this house; another, about eight miles from this place, called Donnally's Fort. This fort was attacked by the Indians in May, 1778; and it is stated that, at the time when the news of this attack reached Lewisburg, there was a Presbyterian clergyman in the fort at this place, and, as he was shortly to leave the place, some of the parents were anxious to have their children baptized before he departed. About the time they were making preparations for administering the ordinance, the news of the assault reached them, and so great was the confusion which it produced, that some of the parents were about to present children who were not their own.

In the year 1785 or '86, the Rev. John McCue settled near this place. He was the first minister of the gospel that ever resided in this region of country, except a Baptist brother who, I am told, was among the first settlers. It is believed that Mr. McCue organized the first churches ever formed of any denomination, not only on the western waters of Virginia, but in much the largest proportion of the Valley of the Mis-

issippi. He organized three congregations—one in this neighborhood, one in the fork of Spring Creek, in this county, and one in what is now Monroe county. We regret that no record of this has been handed down to us. As far as can be ascertained, it was during his ministry in this county that the first Protestant church was built in any of those States which lie west of this. This house stood about one mile and a half or two miles from this place, on the land now owned by Mr. George Osborne, a spot sacred to the memory of Presbyterianism. Mr. McCue continued but a few years in this county. He removed to Augusta county, where he continued to preach until God called him from his labors.

He was succeeded by the Rev. Benjamin Grigsby, who came into this country in the year 1794. He preached to the united congregations of Lewisburg and Union. But no records are left to show what was done during his ministry in these congregations. He removed to Norfolk, where he ceased from his labors, when in the prime of life.

In March, 1808, I was sent by the Synod of Virginia as a missionary into this and the county of Monroe; and being invited to take charge of the united congregations of Lewisburg and Union, I removed to this place in June of the same year. There were at that time four elders in this congregation, and about fifteen or twenty members. In the Union congregation, one elder, and about the same number of members. In Spring Creek, one elder, and, it is believed, six or eight members. This shows that in 1808 there were but three congregations on the western waters of Virginia, two of which had measurably ceased to exist, and in all numbered about fifty members. These congregations had been in a much more flourishing state; but as several years had elapsed from the time that Mr. Grigsby left them until I took charge of them, various circumstances concurred to cause their decline.

There are, at this time, in this presbytery, fifteen congregations; nine of these lie immediately on or near to Greenbrier River; one in Kanawha county; one at Point Pleasant; one in Parkersburg, in the county of Wood; another in a remote part of that county; one on French Creek, in Lewis county; and one in the county of Randolph; containing in all from twelve to fifteen hundred members.

Such is the brief sketch which I have been able to collect on this important subject. But as I have not had recourse to any record or document whatever, this will be a sufficient apology for any mistake I may have made. But in connection with what I have said, I would make a few concluding remarks :

1. It is clear, from the view I have given, that the Presbyterian banner was the first ever set up in this region of country. So far as is known to us, Presbyterians were the first who preached on these western waters, unless it were by the Baptist brother already alluded to. But be this as it may, there can be no doubt but that the first stand ever taken for the cause of God was made by the Presbyterians. They hoisted the first religious flag. They unfurled the first religious banner ever set up in this immense country. They struck the first stroke and reared the first house ever consecrated to God in it. Here the first spark was kindled which has shed so much light over this western world. We, then, as a presbytery, have the honor of cultivating that field, in which the first spot was consecrated to God,—in a country vast in extent,—a country not surpassed for fertility and prosperity by any other in the world,—a country where civil and religious despotism are not known, but where every one is permitted to sit under his own vine and fig tree; and where the gospel has shed no small amount of its benign and heavenly influence. And shall we shrink at the obstacles which lie in our way? Shall we fear success? No; under the great Head of the church “we will set up our banners.”

2. Although Presbyterianism has progressed but slowly in the region in which we set up our banner; still, if we look at the situation of the country, the difficulties that were to be encountered, and the means employed to accomplish the end, the wonder will be that it succeeded at all. For some years preceding that of 1808, the people had but little Presbyterian preaching among them; and no small amount of effort had been made to prejudice them against it, and with no little success. I have been told by several persons, that when I first came into the county they considered it not only unnecessary, but wrong, to go to hear me preach, as they had been taught to believe that Presbyterianism was fatalism—or another name for infidelity. The current of prejudice was strong, and the opposition powerful. Now, for twelve or fifteen years there was but one Presbyterian preacher within the limits which this presbytery now occupies, who had to encounter all the fatigue which was necessary to preach the gospel from point to point; and to contend with all the prejudice and opposition which was made to the cause. The wonder then is, that it has progressed even as well as it has done. Evidently the hand of God has hitherto been with the church; and shall we now fear, when there are ten to one engaged in preaching the word? and when there are thirty to one enlisted in the cause of their Divine Master? Shall we not rather take encouragement from what has been done, and go forth under the full assurance that God will be with us.

3. It is true that religion takes deep root in the heart very much in proportion to the dangers, conflicts and trials through which the believer may be called to pass. To be dandled on the lap of ease, and fondled in the arms of prosperity, often proves a snare to the soul. Hence we find, that those who have been subjected to the greatest trials often make the highest attainment in piety. Many of those who lived at that period in

the church when persecution rose to its highest point, have exhibited religion in its true light before the world; have shown its power and efficacy to sustain the soul under the most excruciating bodily tortures, and to raise it above all the fears of death. How ardent was the piety, and how strong must have been the faith of those venerable martyrs who sealed the truth with their blood! Who can read their lives, and look at the death which they died, and not exclaim, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

But the influence of religion is not confined to those dark ages of cruel persecution. Its effects are felt at all times, and under all the dangers and trials to which we may be subjected. Of this we have a full proof in the character and conduct of those who had to contend with the dangers and trials connected with the first settling of this country. Of these we can know but little. We may read the story, and hear the tale related, and feel something like terror and a glow of sympathy pass over the mind; but we cannot enter into the feelings of those who had them to encounter. We can very imperfectly understand the feelings of those who never for one moment, either by night or by day, considered themselves safe from the attacks of the cruel savage. But, however imperfectly we can enter into their feelings, we can understand that religion was the very thing to sustain the mind under such circumstances, and that the circumstances themselves were well calculated to foster religion in the heart, and to raise the mind to a high stand in piety. Such were their effects on some of the first settlers in this country. I have had the great pleasure to have had no little intercourse with some of those whose souls were tried with these dangers, and I can confidently say that I have never met with any whose piety was more ardent, whose love to their Saviour was stronger, and who manifested more of the life and

spirit of religion in all their walk and conversation before the world. How many are the sweet counsels I have had with them, and how often have they administered consolation to my mind when sinking under the trials which I had to meet in my work!

Let it, then, my brethren, be our highest ambition, under the great Head of the church, to make converts to the faith, whose lives will correspond with the first germs of Presbyterianism which sprung up in this region. Let us not only endeavor "in the name of our God to set up our banners," but to enlist such soldiers as will honor it; such as will exhibit its beauty, glory, and excellency before the world; who, from every step they take, and every effort they make, will show that they have been with Christ. And may the great Head of the church make us useful to this end!