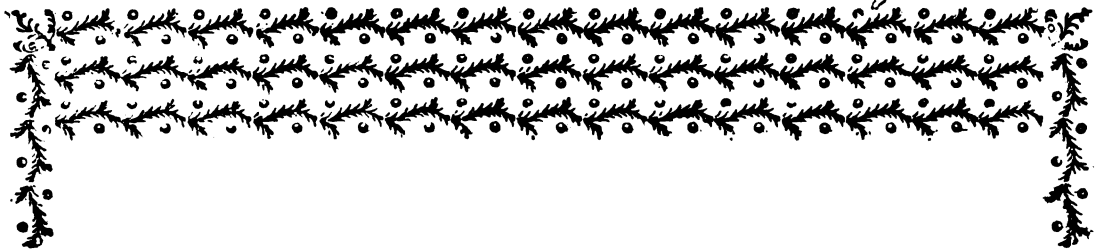


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A

PASTORAL LETTER.



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TO THE
MEMBERS of the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
RESIDING IN
ALEXANDRIA.

My dear Friends and Brethren,

IT is the duty of Pastors to be interested in the welfare of the Flock committed to their care. It would be unnatural to be otherwise, and highly culpable. I feel the heart of a Pastor. It is my daily prayer that, as individuals, you may make advancement in the spiritual life; that, as a society, you may be exemplary for faith and love, purity and zeal. For your sake I study in private and labour in public; I declare the whole counsel of God, not knowingly withholding any part, but prosecuting, according to the abilities which God has given me, the sacred ministry. Let me take this familiar manner of addressing you; be assured I am only influenced by anxiety for the prosperity of the Church, and for the safety and comfort of your immortal Souls.

I have many things to say in your praise—Your place of worship is commodious and extensive; much has it been improved since my connexion with you; and, from the steps you have taken, it might, had not some untoward circumstances occurred, been in a much higher state of improvement. I am indebted to your private friendship; your public support has been fully adequate to my own comfort, and to the comfort of my family. The charity you have for other denominations, is very conspicuous, and is the more praise-worthy, that a great proportion of Christians seem to be destitute of this bright feature in the Christian Character.

You cannot be ignorant of my own sentiments with respect to the different denominations into which the Christian Church is divided. There is a *Catholic or Universal* Church. It consists of every believer through the world. Its members are scattered among all denominations. Each affords to this their respective quotas. The concern of every prudent person is that he be a real believer, one who is spiritual in his heart and life, and thereby constituted a member of the Church Universal. It may not be of great importance to what denomination you belong; (this has been determined commonly by education, or other circumstances purely accidental;)—but it is of high importance in what manner you conduct yourselves as professing christians. In Virginia Episcopacy was long established; other denominations were discountenanced and oppressed. Having the form of Godliness, men were strangers to the power thereof. From establishments formality too often originates. Opposition is necessary as a stimulus. It rouses the lethargic; it excites their utmost exertions. The Presbyterians first broke through the bounds of Episcopacy; oppressed, they felt new animation; they preached with power and success; multitudes attended their ministry; multitudes embodied in a church capacity. Mr. *Davis* distinguished himself in this glorious career. The Baptists followed the example. They came forth with the same spirit. They enjoyed the same success. The Methodists next came in view. Their zeal was great; their perseverance indefatigable; their success eminent. At one time all must be Presbyterians; at another time, the Baptists *only* are the people of God; the Methodists, at a third. Men do not judge prudently in this matter. Each denomination may have their full proportion from among those who never belonged to any

religious society. It is ridiculous to detach yourselves from the denomination to which you belong, from education or choice, and say, "these Presbyterians, these Baptists, these Methodists, seem to have the power of God among them; I will therefore connect myself with them, that I may become religious." Prudence would dictate different language: "These men are more engaged in religion than I am, or than the society to which I belong. God blesses their diligence; he gives them his spirit; they are generally respected. By meditation and prayer I will prepare for the Divine Blessing, and importune it earnestly. I will rouse my friends and my neighbours. It shall be our united endeavour that the flame spread through the whole society; we will strengthen our Pastor's hands, and encourage his heart. The ground is wet around; our fleece shall not be dry. We shall revive; we shall flourish; we shall maintain a name, of which we need not be ashamed among the churches." A resolution of this kind would be more for the general edification of the christian church, than passing from one denomination to another; and exciting such a resolution, seems to be the design of Providence, in permitting those almost innumerable divisions which prevail amongst us. It is human nature to turn any success we have to our own aggrandisement. Much of the old Adam remains even in the spiritual man. The Disciples dreamed of power and wealth. The same leaven has always been found in the church, and has fermented, to the great detriment of true religion. The Church of Rome has arrogated an exclusive title to the christian name; without it's pale it has acknowledged no salvation. By magnificence, by pomp, by splendour in their places of worship, in their religious rites, in the ornaments of their priests, we find a distinguishing characteristic. At the reformation, the reformers had as little charity for the Papists as the Papists had for them. They admitted into the new mode of worship as little of the old as possible; nay some could not bear the most distant vestige of what had long been in use. The same spirit remains, although circumstances be changed. It cannot tyrannize as formerly. It uses however it's utmost power. Unhappy disputes about patronage, an oppressive institution in Scotland, occasioned many learned and pious men to secede from the establishment of that country. The secession was carried on with much heat. Men's passions are unruly. In supporting a rising party, the Church of Scotland was condemned in the lump. The people were exhorted to come out from it, and be separated. Among the Seceders alone primitive purity and zeal must be expected. Americans, I am afraid, are not altogether divested of the same spirit. What means that peculiarity we observe in the dress and manners of numbers? It tells the world such and such persons belong to societies which they are willing should pass as the purest and best on earth. Power only is wanting that such might enforce their opinion. I am against all these badges of distinction. It breathes too much of the Jewish dispensation; it is the flag of party; it rancours the wound which christianity receives in the house of her friends. Let christians be modest and simple in their appearance and manners; let them appear suitable to their stations in life; but let them not affect singularity. It discovers an unfriendly spirit, and ought to be mortified. Any thing which keeps christians at a distance from one another, however innocent in itself, in it's consequence is highly culpable. From the regard I have to the christian church, I would always give my voice against such singularities. Let the distinction be a loving behaviour; a holy life; not external address or outward appearance.

The circumstance I have now mentioned is indifferent in itself; and can attract the attention of a christian minister, no farther than as it encourages a separating spirit, and

seems to proclaim aloud, "Stand by, I am holier than thou." This is the least offensive attempt in any denomination to keep itself distinct from all others. What shall we say of the denomination which excommunicates the member who is not wholly devoted to it's particular interest; but has a heart, a hand to give to members of another denomination, even when the choice is prudent, the party favoured being industrious, orderly and religious; justifying their proceeding by the words of the Apostle, "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath *righteousness* with *unrighteousness*? and what communion hath *light* with *darkness*? and what concord hath *Christ* with *Belial*? or what part hath he who believeth with an *Infidel*?"

A desire to promote a party has been the disgrace of christians since the earliest ages; it has run so high at times as to disgust the more considerate and devout, inducing them to quit attachment to all denominations, and to content themselves with the worship of the heart. This was *Milton's* case. A very credible person in Town has assured me that one of her near relations, of exemplary and pious behaviour, hurt by the acrimony and venom found among different denominations, took the same step.

I believe it will be acknowledged that it is about trifles men are so exact; upon trifles they waste their zeal. I have heard of a person, whose circumstances in life were easy and reputable, when first impressed with religion, persuaded that she could not be acceptable to God unless she dressed herself in osnaburg. Nothing could prevent her from what she thought her duty. In osnaburg she appeared for some time. Her mind was not relieved; she supposed she had discovered the reason. Let her change the osnaburg for *crocus*, the coarsest wear in use, and she expected relief. The change is made; but she remains uneasy. These whims had their influence for some time, until, through the assistance of her Pastor, attended with meditation and prayer, she assumed her usual habit, and bestowed that attention which had been thrown away upon outward appearance, upon the disposition of her mind, and the tenor of her conduct. She gradually became more easy, she obtained peace, and lives an ornament to our holy religion.

If these things be well weighed, they must lessen our admiration for external appearances of any kind; and, instead of seeking religion in this denomination, or that, let us know it may be found in any, provided proper steps be taken; for these are distinct members of the same body, different parts of the same building, separate societies united to the same church.

It is our duty, our honour, our interest, to have the denomination, with which we are connected, on as reputable a footing as possible, that it may afford at least it's full quota. Let not our candlestick be removed from it's place; let not our lamp be extinguished.

I address myself to Presbyterians, and entreat you, as you regard the welfare, nay, the existence of our church, to listen to the following advices, weigh them well, act uniformly upon them.

I call your attention, first, to your own hearts. See that individually you be impressed with the importance of religion. In spite of the contempt of the immoral, the sneer of the scornful, it is of eternal moment. The superstition and enthusiasm of it's ministers, when exposed, have landed men in the opposite extreme of irreligion and infidelity. This seems at present to be the case with the generality of the French. Impute this to the folly or wickedness of men. The religion of the Bible is pure and holy; it shines through the greatest darkness; it makes you safe and happy now; it introduces

you at death into a paradise of full and everlasting joy. Take it not upon my word—Be at pains to know your wileness and danger as guilty creatures. Learn this from the miseries on earth; from the torments in hell; from the loss of paradise to Adam; of Heaven to Angels; from the thunderings of Sinai; from the astonishing scene displayed on Calvary; let the view lead you to Jesus, who is the friend of sinners, who saves to the uttermost; who can guide you now, and bless you afterwards. Let the example the Saviour has set, the precepts which he has given, employ your thoughts and regulate your conduct. Let these things be often in your minds; let them occasion frequent and earnest prayer—you will be satisfied with your success—remain indifferent you are undone—up and be doing—God will work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. A Physician impresses your mind with a sense of the inveteracy of the disease, that you may take proper steps for your recovery,—your house in flames, a friend rouses you from your dangerous slumbers; under the guilt and power of sin the gospel gives you the alarm—it calls after you through all your wanderings—“This is the way”—It proclaims aloud, “Fly ye prisoners of hope to your strong holds,” let it no longer be your reproach that you are neither hot nor cold. Boast not so confidently, “I am rich and increased in goods and have need of nothing;” for unless you be spiritual, and heavenly, God knows you are “wretched and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked.” Were it a trifle I should be silent; it is no trifle; eternal happiness or eternal misery depends in some measure on your present conduct; with the prodigal come to yourselves; consider with the Prodigal, “in my father’s house is bread and to spare;” arise and go to your father.

Impressed with these things yourselves endeavour to communicate the same impression to your families. Family religion is much neglected. It must be revived, otherwise religion will not flourish. Pray with your families, morning and evening—instruct them, according to their capacities. The evening of the Lord’s day ought to be devoted to this duty; it is absolutely essential. Public worship is binding by divine authority, private instruction is equally binding.

Let neither be neglected. I cannot see the advantage of pressing one Public service upon another. Time is due to reflection and to your families; no time so suitable as the evening of the Lord’s day. A Parent retired on that evening, with his family, talking familiarly with them, instructing them, praying for them, is in his proper place. No appearance more pleasing; none more useful; none more dignified. Let not this duty be neglected. The neglect has had a baneful influence in America; young people grow up ignorant of religion, they are a prey to every innovation: Blown about are they with every wind of doctrine. Let me charge it upon you, O! parents instruct your families in the fear of God. I have mentioned one season for that purpose. Let it not be occupied by any other service, not even services of a public nature; you know the anecdote of the young criminal on the fatal tree; he begged to be one moment in private with his mother.—He is gratified—Whispering something to her in appearance, to the astonishment of the multitude he bit off her ear, bitterly exclaiming; “had you restrained me when young I had not come to this end!” I have known a child, called upon to say his prayers, shew little disposition to pray, apologizing, “I am too old:” “Too old,” says his friend, “you can never be too old to pray—“yes” is the reply. “I am too old, my father never prays.” A heart, possessed of any feeling, would be tortured at such occurrences; and what will be your situation, parents, at the day of judgment, when your families shall come forward and condemn you, imputing their errors and crimes to your neglect, or what is still worse, to your example. One

addresses you who knows the heart of a parent; he has seen his child on the brink of the grave---It is his endeavour to do his duty; yet the awful sight has agonized his heart lest that duty had not been done with the care and fidelity which it deserved.

Individuals and families fully impressed with religion will find a pleasure in complying with

My third advice; come together to the house of prayer; it is lamentable to see how public worship is despised; many consider it as a task. Their behaviour at least speaks such a sentiment, unless your services are free and cheerful, they cannot be acceptable to God. What views can a great proportion have in their acts of public worship?—They have no manner of steadiness. They attend at one assembly one Lord's day— at another the next—they absent themselves from all assemblies the day following. I have known the branches of the same family scattered—the father here, the mother there, the child at a third place. This is not for edification---it exposes the want of family government. Attending together, and regularly, on public worship, has the best effect---it tends to good order---it is a new bond of union---nothing so good nor pleasing. A minister cannot do his duty where he has no dependence on his audience. Such conduct looks as if curiosity, not edification, were in view. You do not prepare for public worship---you do not think what you are doing---you do not recollect the promises given for the encouragement of worshippers---you do not urge these promises at a throne of grace. No wonder you are not edified. If you be not importunate with God for his presence---if you enjoy not his blessing---Gabriel could be of no benefit to you; but if such be your circumstances, the weakest means, those who in comparison are nothing, will be the instruments of your refreshment and edification. “I know not how it is,” said an old Christian to me, after preaching with unusual animation, “I know not how it is, but I could find no time to pray for myself this morning, I have been so engaged in praying for you”—Were you more engaged in prayer; I make no doubt but the ministry would be more effectual and useful. Success depends as much on the People as on the Ministers. Be you only engaged in praying for them, and there is no doubt but they will be engaged in preaching to you. It is heartless work preaching to a prayerless people---It is rowing against the stream---little progress can be made. Were you not only regular in attending worship, but did you prepare for it by meditation and prayer, doubt not, but as a church you would enjoy times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. A Pastor who had laboured long to little purpose, was at last successful. He had never ventured into public service without having his subject fully digested. He had spoken hitherto in vain---now efficacy attends his word---“Oh! Sir,” was an address made him by one of his people, “had you always preached thus to us, in what an advanced state of religion might we now have been!” The fact was, the same words, the same sentences, in all respects the same discourse had more than once been delivered in their hearing, but they were now disposed to hear and to make improvement, which had not formerly been the case.

My last advice is, be united. It is distressing to observe your want of union. You discover little friendship for one another. It is almost impossible to get you together to consult on matters of public utility. If proper schemes be formed, it is nearly equally impossible to put them in execution. Why is our church so often deserted? From want of union. Whence the difficulty of introducing discipline and good order? From want of union. What renders us contemptible in the eyes of other denominations? There is no union among us. A bunch of twigs separated may easily

be broken ; tied together, they cannot, without difficulty, be injured. In your present state you are liable to be dissolved---were you once united, no society could be more flourishing. Suppose sixty persons engaged like one man in any undertaking ; suppose also that they are in the lower ranks of life ; still the effects of their union are astonishing. They approve of *this mode* of worship ; each of them has some influence over others, suppose three ; this interests 180 in their views---These 180 have also three over whom their influence is considerable ; this brings 540 into the same views-- the influence extends far---On this principle I account for the crowds which attend other denominations---Each is engaged in the matter and employ their whole influence for the advantage of the society to which they adhere. Follow the example---be equally united --be equally in earnest. It would fill, it would crowd, your place of worship. To accomplish this end, you ought to be often together, to consult the welfare of the congregation. Men can be more familiar with those whose education and manner of life are similar.---Let Mechanics, let Merchants, let Men of Letters have regular times of seeing one another, when the question may be brought forward, what can be done to promote the interest of our religious society ? Communicate the result of your inquiries to one another---plans will soon be adopted of general utility.

I particularly recommend meetings of a religious kind ; meet to consult how private, how family, how public devotion may be best promoted, and to recommend yourselves, your families, the church, to the mercy and blessing of God.

I need not be more particular. It must be evident what abuses require immediate correction ; what orders ought immediately to be taken ; and what conduct ought to be steadily followed. It comprehends all when I recommend, " let brotherly love continue."

I cannot finish this without suggesting an alteration in the place of worship, which would conduce to the general welfare of the society. You have ordered a pulpit ; which is equally neat and convenient--the seats are neither calculated for the purpose of hearing, nor of being taken up. I would propose that they all be made single pews. Thus the house would accommodate you better, and accommodate a greater number. This cannot be done without your own consent individually. On supposition of the union I recommend, obtaining this consent will be no difficult thing ; nay, on the same supposition, filling the church, when thus enlarged, will be equally easy.

I have unbosomed myself freely to you, my friends and brethren, on a subject of so interesting a nature--I pray God may incline your hearts to consult the good of Zion, and bless you in all attempts for this purpose !

Your Servant in the Gospel of Christ,

JAMES MUIR.

Alexandria, May 28, 1793.

