

Awakening the Church to the Work of Reformation

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Before I come to my principal errand, I shall give you an account of the reasons of the following work, and of the freedom of speech I have used, which to some may be displeasing. When the Lord had awakened his ministers in the county of Worcestershire, and some neighbouring parts, to a sense of their duty in the work of catechizing, and private instruction of all in their parishes who would not obstinately refuse their help, and when they had subscribed an agreement, containing their resolutions for the future performance of it, they judged it unmeet to enter upon the work, without a solemn humbling of their souls before the Lord, for their long neglect of so great and necessary a duty; and, therefore, they agreed to meet together at Worcester, December 4, 1655, and there to join in humiliation and in earnest prayer to God, for the pardon of our neglects, and for his special assistance in the work which we had undertaken, and for the success of it with the people whom we had engaged to instruct; at which time, among others, I was desired by them to preach. In compliance with their wishes, I prepared the following Discourse; which, though it proved longer than could be delivered in one or two sermons, yet I intended to have entered upon it at that time, and to have delivered that which was most pertinent to the occasion, and to have reserved the rest to another season. But, before the meeting, by the increase of my ordinary pain and weakness, I was disabled from going thither; to recompense which unwilling omission, I easily yielded to the request of divers of the brethren, forthwith to publish the things which I had prepared, that they might read that which they could not hear. If it be objected, that I should not have spoken so plainly and sharply against the sins of the ministry, or that I should not have published it to the view of the world; or, at least, that I should have done it in another tongue, and not in the ears of the vulgar; especially, at such a time, when Quakers and Papists are endeavouring to bring the ministry into contempt, and the people are too prone to hearken to their suggestions — I confess I thought the objection very considerable; but that it prevailed not to alter my resolution, is to be ascribed, among others, to the following reasons: 1. It was a proposed solemn humiliation that we agreed on, and that this was prepared and intended for. And how should we be humbled without a plain confession of our sin? 2. It was principally our

own sins that the confession did concern; and who can be offended with us for confessing our own sins, and taking the blame and shame to ourselves, which our consciences told us we ought to do? 3. Having necessarily prepared it in the English tongue, I had no spare time to translate it into Latin. 4. When the sin is open in the sight of the world, it is vain to attempt to hide it; all such attempts will but aggravate and increase our shame. 5. A free confession is a condition of a full remission; and when the sin is public, the confession should also be public.

If the ministers of England had sinned only in Latin, I would have made shift to admonish them in Latin, or else have said nothing to them. But if they will sin in English, they must hear of it in English. Unpardoned sin will never let us rest or prosper, though we be at ever so much care and cost to cover it: our sin will surely find us out, though we find not it out. The work of confession is purposely to make known our sin, and freely to take the shame to ourselves; and if 'he that confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall have mercy,' no wonder if 'he that covereth them shall not prosper.' If we be so tender of ourselves, and so loath to confess, God will be the less tender of us, and he will indite our confessions for us. He will either force our consciences to confession, or his judgments shall proclaim our iniquities to the world.

6. Too many who have undertaken the work of the ministry do so obstinately proceed in self-seeking, negligence, pride, and other sins, that it is become our necessary duty to admonish them. If we saw that such would reform without reproof, we would gladly forbear the publishing of their faults. But when reproofs themselves prove so ineffectual, that they are more offended at the reproof than at the sin, and had rather that we should cease reproving than that themselves should cease sinning, I think it is time to sharpen the remedy. For what else should we do? To give up our brethren as incurable were cruelty, as long as there are further means to be used.

We must not hate them, but plainly rebuke them, and not suffer sin upon them. To bear with the vices of the ministry is to promote the ruin of the Church; for what speedier way is there for the depraving and undoing of the people, than the depravity of their guides? And how can we more effectually further a reformation, than by endeavouring to reform the leaders of the Church? For my part, I have done as I would be done by; and it is for the safety of the Church, and in tender love to the brethren, whom I venture to reprehend —

not to make them contemptible and odious, but to heal the evils that would make them so — that so no enemy may find this matter of reproach among us. But, especially, because our faithful endeavours are of so great necessity to the welfare of the Church, and the saving of men's souls, that it will not consist with a love to either, to be negligent ourselves, or silently to connive at negligence in others. If thousands of you were in a leaking ship, and those that should pump out the water, and stop the leaks, should be sporting or asleep, or even but favouring themselves in their labours, to the hazarding of you all, would you not awaken them to their work and call on them to labour as for your lives? And if you used some sharpness and importunity with the slothful, would you think that man was in his wits who would take it ill of you, and accuse you of pride, self-conceitedness, or unmannerliness, to presume to talk so saucily to your fellow-workmen, or that should tell you that you wrong them by diminishing their reputation?

Would you not say, 'The work must be done, or we are all dead men. Is the ship ready to sink, and do you talk of reputation? or had you rather hazard yourself and us, than hear of your slothfulness?' This is our case, brethren, The work of God must needs be done! Souls must not perish, while you mind your worldly business or worldly pleasure, and take your ease, or quarrel with your brethren!

Nor must we be silent while men are hastened by you to perdition, and the Church brought into greater danger and confusion, for fear of seeming too uncivil and unmannerly with you, or displeasing your impatient souls! Would you be but as impatient with your sins as with our reproofs, you should hear no more from us, but we should be all agreed! But, neither God nor good men will let you alone in such sins. Yet if you had betaken yourselves to another calling, and would sin to yourselves only, and would perish alone, we should not have so much necessity of molesting you, as now we have: but if you will enter into the office of the ministry, which is for the necessary preservation of us all, so that by letting you alone in your sin, we must give up the Church to loss and hazard, blame us not if we talk to you more freely than you would have us to do. If your own body were sick, and you will despise the remedy, or if your own house were on fire, and you will be singing or quarrelling in the streets, I could possibly bear it, and let you alone, (which yet, in charity, I should not easily do,) but, if you will undertake to be the physician of an hospital, or to a whole town that is infected with the plague, or will undertake to quench all the fires that shall be kindled

in the town, there is no bearing with your remissness, how much so ever it may displease you. Take it how you will, you must be told of it; and if that will not serve, you must be told of it yet more plainly; and, if that will not serve, if you be rejected as well as reprehended, you may thank yourselves. I speak all this to none but the guilty.

And, thus, I have given you those reasons which forced me to publish, in plain English, so much of the sins of the ministry as in the following Treatise I have done. And I suppose the more penitent and humble any are, and the more desirous of the true reformation of the Church, the more easily and fully will they approve such free confessions and reprehensions. But I find it will be impossible to avoid offending those who are at once guilty and impenitent; for there is no way of avoiding this, but by our silence, or their patience: and silent we cannot be, because of God's commands; and patient they will not be, because of their guilt and impenitence. But plain dealers will always be approved in the end; and the time is at hand when you will confess that they were your best friends. But my principal business is yet behind. I must now take the boldness, brethren, to become your monitor, concerning some of the necessary duties, of which I have spoken in the ensuing discourse. If any of you should charge me with arrogance or immodesty for this attempt, as if hereby I accused you of negligence, or judged myself sufficient to admonish you, I crave your candid interpretation of my boldness, assuring you that I obey not the counsel of my flesh herein, but displease myself as much as some of you; and would rather have the ease and peace of silence, if it would stand with my duty, and the churches' good. But it is the mere necessity of the souls of men, and my desire of their salvation, and of the prosperity of the Church, which forceth me to this arrogance and immodesty, if so it must be called. For who, that hath a tongue, can be silent, when it is for the honour of God, the welfare of his Church, and the everlasting happiness of so many souls?

The first and main point, which I have to propound to you, is this, whether it be not the unquestionable duty of the generality of ministers of these three nations, to set themselves presently to the work of catechizing, and instructing individually, all that are committed to their care, who will be persuaded to submit thereunto? I need not here stand to prove it, having sufficiently done this in the following discourse. Can you think that holy wisdom will gainsay it? Will zeal for God; will delight in his service, or love to the souls of men, gainsay it.

1. That people must be taught the principles of religion, and matters of greatest necessity to

salvation, is past doubt among us.

2. That they must be taught it in the most edifying, advantageous way, I hope we are agreed.

3. That personal conference, and examination, and instruction, hath many excellent advantages for their good, is no less beyond dispute.

4. That personal instruction is recommended to us by Scripture, and by the practice of the servants of Christ, and approved by the godly of all ages, is, so far as I can find, without contradiction.

5. It is past doubt, that we should perform this great duty to all the people, or as many as we can; for our love and care of their souls must extend to all. If there are five hundred or a thousand ignorant people in your parish or congregation, it is a poor discharge of your duty, now and then to speak to some few of them, and to let the rest alone in their ignorance, if you are able to afford them help.

6. It is no less certain, that so great a work as this is should take up a considerable part of our time. Lastly, it is equally certain that all duties should be done in order, as far as may be, and therefore should have their appointed times. And if we are agreed to practice, according to these commonly acknowledged truths, we need not differ upon any doubtful circumstances.

I do now, in the behalf of Christ, and for the sake of his Church, and the immortal souls of men, beseech all the faithful ministers of Christ, that they will presently and effectually fall upon this work. Combine for the unanimous performance of it, that it may more easily procure the submission of your people. I must confess, I find, by some experience, that this is the work that, through the grace of God, which worketh by means, must reform indeed; that must expel our common prevailing ignorance; that must bow the stubborn hearts of sinners; that must answer their vain objections, and take off their prejudices; that must reconcile their hearts to faithful ministers, and help on the success of our public preaching; and make true godliness a commoner thing than it has hitherto been. I find that we never took the best course for demolishing the kingdom of darkness, till now.

I wonder at myself, how I was so long kept off from so clear and excellent a duty. But the case was with me, as I suppose it is with others. I was long convinced of it, but my

apprehensions of the difficulties were too great, and my apprehensions of the duty too small, and so I was long hindered from the performance of it. I imagined the people would scorn it, and none but a few, who had least need, would submit to it, and I thought my strength would never go through with it, having so great burdens on me before; and thus I long delayed it, which I beseech the Lord of mercy to forgive.

Whereas, upon trial, I find the difficulties almost nothing (save only through my extraordinary bodily weakness) to that which I imagined; and I find the benefits and comforts of the work to be such, that I would not wish I had forborne it, for all the riches in the world. We spend Monday and Tuesday, from morning almost to night, in the work, taking about fifteen or sixteen families in a week, that we may go through the parish, in which there are upwards of eight hundred families, in a year; and I cannot say yet that one family hath refused to come to me, and but few persons excused themselves, and shifted it off. And I find more outward signs of success with most that do come, than from all my public preaching to them. If you say, It is not so in most places, I answer, I wish that the blame of this may not lie much with ourselves. If, however, some refuse your help, that will not excuse you for not affording it to them that would accept of it. If you ask me what course I take for order and expedition, I may here mention, that, at the delivery of the Catechisms, I take a catalogue of all the persons of understanding in the parish, and the clerk goeth a week before, to every family, to tell them what day to come, and at what hour, (one family at eight o'clock, the next at nine, and the next at ten, etc.) And I am forced by the number to deal with a whole family at once; but ordinarily I admit not any of another family to be present. Brethren, do I now invite you to this work, without the authority of God, without the consent of all antiquity, without the consent of the Reformed Divines, or without the conviction of your own consciences? See what the Westminster Assembly speak occasionally in the Directory, about the visitation of the sick: 'It is the duty of the minister not only to teach the people committed to his charge in public, but privately, and particularly to admonish, exhort, reprove, and comfort them upon all seasonable occasions, so far as his time, strength, and personal safety will permit. He is to admonish them in time of health to prepare for death. And for that purpose, they are often to confer with their minister about the estate of their souls,' etc. Read this over again, and consider it. Hearken to God, if you would have peace with God. Hearken to conscience, if you would have peace

of conscience. I am resolved to deal plainly with you, though I should displease you. It is an unlikely thing that there should be a heart sincerely devoted to God in that man, who, after advertisements and exhortations, will not resolve on so clear and great a duty. I cannot conceive that he who hath one spark of saving grace, and so hath that love to God, and delight to do his will, which is in all the sanctified, could possibly be drawn to oppose or refuse such a work as this; except under the power of such a temptation as Peter was, when he denied Christ, or when he dissuaded him from suffering, and heard a half excommunication, 'Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offense unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.' You have put your hand to the plough; you are doubly devoted to him, as Christians, and as pastors; and dare you, after this, draw back, and refuse his work? You see the work of reformation at a stand; and you are engaged by many obligations to promote it: and dare you now neglect the means by which it must be done?

Will you show your faces in a Christian congregation, as ministers of the gospel, and there pray for a reformation, and for the conversion and salvation of your hearers, and for the prosperity of the Church; and when you have done, refuse to use the means by which all this must be effected?

I know carnal wit will never want words and show of reason, to gainsay that truth and duty which it abhors. It is easier now to cavil against duty than to perform it: but wait the end, before you pass your final judgment. Can you make yourselves believe that you will have a comfortable review of these neglects, or make a comfortable account of them to God? I dare prognosticate, from the knowledge of the nature of grace, that all the godly ministers in England will make conscience of this duty, and address themselves to it, except those who, by some extraordinary accident, are disabled, or who are under such temptations as aforesaid. I do not hopelessly persuade you to it, but take it for granted that it will be done. And if any lazy, or jealous, or malicious hypocrites, do cavil against it, or hold off, the rest will not do so; but they will take the opportunity, and not resist the warnings of the Lord. And God will uncase the hypocrites ere long, and make them know, to their sorrow, what it was to trifle with him. Woe to them, when they must account for the blood of souls! The reasons which satisfied them here against duty, will not then satisfy them against duty; but will be manifested to have been the effects of their folly, and to have proceeded radically

from their corrupted wills, and carnal interest. Nor will their consciences own those reasons at a dying hour, which now they seem to own. Then they shall feel to their sorrow, that there is not that comfort to be had for a departing soul, in the review of such neglected duty, as there is to them that have wholly devoted themselves to the service of the Lord. I am sure my arguments for this duty will appear strongest at the last when they shall be viewed at the hour of death at the day of judgment and, especially, in the light of eternity.

And now, brethren, I earnestly beseech you, in the name of God, and for the sake of your people's souls, that you will not slightly slubber over this work, but do it vigorously, and with all your might; and make it your great and serious business. Much judgment is required for the managing of it. Study, therefore, beforehand, how to do it, as you study for your sermons. I remember how earnest I was with some of the last parliament, that they would settle catechists in our assemblies; but truly I am not sorry that it took not effect, unless for a few of the larger congregations. For I perceive, that all the life of the work, under God, doth lie in the prudent effectual management of it, in searching men's hearts, and setting home the truth to their consciences; and the ablest minister is weak enough for this, and few of inferior parts would be found competent to it. For I fear nothing more, than that many ministers, who preach well, will be found but imperfectly qualified for this work, especially to manage it with old, ignorant, dead-hearted sinners. And, indeed, if the ministers be not revered by the people, they will rather slight them, and contest with them, than humbly learn and submit to them: how much more would they do so by inferior men? Seeing, then, the work is cast upon us, and it is we that must do it, or else it must be undone, let us be up and doing with all our might. When you are speaking to your people, do it with the greatest prudence and seriousness, and be as earnest with them as for life or death; and follow it as closely as you do your public exhortations in the pulpit. I profess again, it is to me the most comfortable work, except public preaching, (for there I speak to more, though yet with less advantage to each individual,) that ever I yet did set my hand to. And I doubt not but you will find it so too, if you only perform it faithfully.

My second request to the ministers in these kingdoms, is, that they would at last, without any more delay, unanimously set themselves to the practice of those parts of Church discipline which are unquestionably necessary, and part of their work. It is a sad case, that good men should settle themselves so long in the constant neglect of so great a duty. The

common cry is, 'Our people are not ready for it; they will not bear it.' But is not the fact rather, that you will not bear the trouble and hatred which it will occasion? If indeed, you proclaim our churches incapable of the order and government of Christ, what do you but give up the cause to them that withdraw from us, and encourage men to look out for better societies, where that discipline may be had. For though preaching and sacraments may be omitted in some cases, till a fitter season, and accordingly so may discipline; yet it is a hard case to settle in a constant neglect, for so many years together, as we have done, unless there were an absolute impossibility of the work. And if it were so, because of our incapable materials, it would plainly call us to alter our constitution, that the matter may be capable.

I have spoken plainly afterwards of this, which I hope you will conscientiously consider of. I now only beseech you, if you would give a comfortable account to the chief Shepherd, and would not be found unfaithful in the house of God, that you do not wilfully or negligently delay it, as if it were a needless thing; nor shrink from it, because of the trouble to the flesh that doth attend it; for as that is a sad sign of hypocrisy, so the costliest duties are usually the most comfortable; and you may be sure that Christ will bear the cost.

My last request is that all the faithful ministers of Christ would, without any more delay, unite and associate for the furtherance of each other in the work of the Lord, and the maintaining of unity and concord in his churches. And that they would not neglect their brotherly meetings to those ends, nor yet spend them unprofitably, but improve them to their edification, and the effectual carrying on the work. Read that excellent letter of Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of Canterbury to Queen Elizabeth, for ministerial meetings and exercises. You will find it in Fuller's History of the Church of England.

Brethren, I crave your pardon for the infirmities of this address; and earnestly longing for the success of your labours, I shall daily beg of God, that he would persuade you to those duties which I have here recommended to you, and would preserve and prosper you therein, against all the serpentine subtlety and rage that are now engaged to oppose and hinder you.