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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

ON THE

OPENING OF THEIR SESSION, IN

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BY JOHN H. RICE, D. D. MODERATOR.

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SERMON.

Let us therefore follow after the things that make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.....
 ROM. XIV. 19.

IN this and a part of the following chapter, the Apostle treats of some of the smaller matters of religion, about which there were contentions in the church at Rome. Some of the Jews, although they had embraced the gospel, strongly adhered to the ceremonies of the ancient ritual; and censured, as profane, their brethren who entertained a contrary opinion and pursued a different practice. On the other hand, the believing Gentiles, having never been subjected to these prejudices, or having been better instructed in their christian liberty, when they heard the Jews insisting on observances, which had no real goodness in them, and which had been abrogated by Christ, were disposed to despise them as weak and superstitious, and to refuse communion with them. The apostle's object is to heal these divisions, and persuade the disciples to pursue a course of conduct more becoming their hopes and high calling. To this end he says a number of things, which need not here be particularly noted: because they apply to obsolete controversies. The

spirit however of all that he says, deserves most particular attention at all times. It seems to be contained in the words of the text, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for our peace, and things wherewith one may edify another."

This verse is the application of the foregoing discourse, and contains an exhortation to the practice of two great duties, *peace* and *mutual edification*. The reference here seems to be particularly made to christians in their relations one to another. In this epistle xii. 18, the apostle had exhorted christians to live peaceably with *all men*, but here has in view, *concord among brethren*. This is a subject in which he delights; and often dwells on in his writings. 2 Cor. xiii. 11.—Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Eph. iv. 1—3. I therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called; with all lowliness and meekness; with longsuffering; forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Col. iii. 15. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body. 1 Thess. v. 13. Be at peace among yourselves. And many other passages.

But christians ought not barely to live peaceably with one another; mutual edification ought always to be endeavoured. The apostle urges this with frequency and zeal. Rom. xv. 2. Let every one of us please his neighbour for good to edification. Eph. v. 29. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. 1 Thess. v. 11. Wherefore comfort yourselves together and edify one another as also ye do. 1 Cor. xiv. 12. Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. 26. Let all things be done to edification. Now all these precepts, universally binding the members of the church, may with peculiar propriety be applied to ministers of the gospel and officers of the church, met in ecclesiastical council. There was.

as it appears to me, a remarkable exemplification of the spirit and temper recommended by Paul, in that council, which is generally thought to have been the first ever held in the christian church. We have the record in the Acts of the Apostles, chap. xv. On that occasion there was great diversity of opinions, and much disputing or argumentation on each side, but the decree which was passed, manifested a strong disposition to concede, to heal divisions, and by promoting a brotherly spirit advance the peace and edification of the church. What was exactly the import of the restriction laid on the gentile converts by that decree, we shall not now inquire. It is sufficient to note that it had, in part at least, a special reference to Jewish prejudices. This is apparent from the reason assigned by James, when he gave his opinion, "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day." This example we are bound to follow. It is our duty as members of this General Assembly to follow after things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another.

Obligation to perform a duty, implies obligation to avoid all that would hinder its performance, or prevent the effect contemplated. This is too obvious to require proof. It may be remarked however that the admirable art of peacemaking, and peace-preserving depends in a great degree on this negative virtue of abstaining. Now as we are members of an ecclesiastical council, loaded with a most weighty responsibility, bound to promote the peace and general welfare of the church, may it not be profitable to look a little into human nature, and a little into the history of the church, that we may have plainly before us what things we ought to avoid, and thus keep continual watch over ourselves? It is taken for granted that this design is not unsuitable to the present occasion, or misbecoming the preacher in the station which he is this day called to occupy. With this assurance, I remark,

I. In the first place, that in the councils of former times the members seem to have often been forgetful of

their weakness, and their liability to error. Meeting as representatives of the church, and feeling strong in numbers and in delegated power, they were ready to suppose themselves invested with a degree of wisdom which by no means belonged to them, and to set up claims for knowledge which they could not sustain. These high and overweening pretensions have wrought unspeakable mischief in the christian society. They lead to the monstrous assumption of infallibility in what was misnamed the Holy and Apostolic Church; but while these arrogant claims have been renounced by Protestants, they have sometimes appeared to forget how frail and fallible is man in his very best estate. They who are under no particular bias, see in the members of ecclesiastical councils men of like passions, of the same infirmities with themselves, and seeing this, they are very ready to resist every thing that seems to be founded on claims of superior wisdom. The *official* pretensions, which men are not unapt to set up are generally offensive. A survey of the past, suggests the salutary advice, that we, as lovers of concord and bound to follow the things that make for peace, should diligently cultivate humbleness of mind, should not be wise in our own conceit, should each esteem the other better than himself. This brings me to observe,

II. In the second place, that, as I interpret ecclesiastical history, the love of *distinction* and of *influence* has had a disastrous effect on the peace of the church. We indeed, happily delivered from all entangling and corrupting alliances with the state and its politics, may be considered, on this account, as less exposed to evils of this sort. Nevertheless, we are by no means free from danger. In the days of the apostles, the church was disturbed by men who loved the pre-eminence; before the establishment of christianity, peace was marred and councils were disturbed by the aspirings of ambition. And it deserves remark, that the only influence that can be exercised among us, the only distinction that we can attain, is precisely that, which men educated apart from the world and by profession separated from its noise and its bustle, and taught to aim at high intellectual and mo-

ral improvement, would be most likely to covet and pursue—the *influence* which master spirits exercise over their associates, the distinction of acknowledged eminence in genius, and learning; and perhaps we ought to add, in piety. For such is poor human nature, that not unfrequently there are the minglings of pride and vanity, with our very piety and humility.

Perhaps there is peculiar danger of self deception here, and of the allowed indulgence of this ambitious desire. There is a deference due to the truly good, and great, which when shown, we can easily conceive to be very acceptable. Certainly, too, it greatly facilitates the execution of their purposes of comprehensive benevolence, of their noble schemes for promoting the glory of God, and the good of man. Thus far, its effects, beyond a doubt, are salutary. Scarcely, too, can a spectacle of greater moral sublimity be presented to our view, than that of a man, who by his genius and learning has acquired a mastery over the understandings of others, and by his goodness has gained their confidence, swaying them to purposes, and rousing them to the accomplishment of designs, which all the truly good in the universe approve, and God Almighty himself sanctions. It is not at all wonderful that such influence should be the object of desire; that high-minded and generous men should seek to obtain it. But how easy is it, for the greater facility in doing good to be the *ostensible motive*, while either in whole or in part, the *pleasure of influence* is the true reason why we seek it. And when this is the case, it cannot be surprising that men should attempt to gain their end, without that scrupulous regard to means which religion requires. In the very best, there is a great mixture of human infirmity. Weaknesses of the kind now under consideration are most apt to show themselves, when men are put forward into public stations, and brought within the sphere of immediate public observation. Then, they feel peculiarly bound to support their own dignity, and maintain that influence which they suppose necessary to their usefulness: of course they are too apt to maintain with warmth

and pertinacity the ground which they have taken. Thus peace has often been sacrificed, the councils of the church have been disturbed, and that good prevented which might otherwise have been accomplished. Surely since these things are so, we cannot be too much on our guard against the insidious approaches of that ambitious desire, which while it partakes of the character and produces the effects of vice, wears the garb and comes in guise of christian virtue, of zeal for the glory of God, and benevolence to man. Bound as we are to follow the things that make for peace, we ought to watch and pray against the sinister effects of a love of distinction, and a desire to exercise influence.

III. Peace has often been disturbed, and ecclesiastical councils violently agitated, by party-spirit.

Parties have been raised in the church in various ways. The love of influence and distinction has often produced this unhappy effect. Ecclesiastical history furnishes many examples of the following kind. A man possessing many good qualities and much zeal, wishes to be greatly useful; and at the same time secretly, perhaps, and unawares to himself, he is not unwilling to enjoy the credit of some new and notable discovery in religion. He sets to work, and soon constructs a scheme: enamoured of his own production, and identifying it with the interests of truth and the welfare of the church, he is zealous to make proselytes. It is not at all difficult thus to succeed, and gain some little distinction. Another aims at the same thing by professing unusual zeal for the good old way. A third sets afloat a reconciling plan; or constructs a scheme different both from the old and the new. And thus a number of small parties have risen up in the church, to perplex plain people, who simply wish to know what they must do to be saved; to disturb the harmony of the ecclesiastical councils; and prevent unity of purpose and co-operation in the great designs for which such assemblies are held. Men bound to follow the things that make for peace, should be on their guard against these disquieting vanities, and set themselves steadfastly against a spirit of

party. For the most part these are things that acquire importance from direct opposition. This gratifies the love of distinction, and urges to greater activity and zeal. Let the man alone, and he and his scheme soon die, and are forgotten. When one sees that he attracts no notice, he will soon become tired of efforts made expressly for the purpose of attracting notice, and give over his unprofitable labour.

While adverting to what are called new discoveries in religion, it may be as well to repeat an old remark, that none are to be expected. In the progress of human science, and of vital religion, (if, indeed, there is, in this last, any progress,) all that can reasonably be expected is, a better understanding of that system of doctrine which has been received from the beginning. Or, perhaps, the idea will be better expressed by saying, that the progress of the human mind will, in its utmost achievements on this subject, disembarass some parts of the system of divine truth, which have hitherto been encompassed with difficulties. A consideration of this truth, and a recollection of the unnumbered schemes that have been brought forward and maintained with all the warmth of partizan zeal, and then sunk, so that barely a name has been left, may well abate any rage for systematizing that may now prevail, and extinguish any high hopes that any may conceive in the present day, of prefixing their names to an *Ism*, which will last beyond their own time.

But it may be well to notice another thing which has generated parties in the church of Christ, and has often disturbed the peace which all ought to maintain. It is the attempt to produce uniformity of opinion. Man never likes it, when another differs from him in sentiment. The case, however, is so common, that in ordinary matters he is obliged to put up with it, and allow the current of his kindness to flow without interruption. Yet when there is a subject of paramount importance engaging his attention,—one, the value of which rises beyond his conceptions,—he is exceedingly apt to invest all its incidental circumstances, and all its

connections, with the dignity and value of the main point, and to require that all should think and feel throughout the whole with him. But the attempt to produce this entire uniformity is one of the vainest that man, in the pride of his heart, has ever made. We are placed, from our infancy, and during the whole progress of education, under the operation of so many causes calculated to diversify our sentiments, the subjects of thought are, in different men, connected with so many different associations of ideas and feelings, that the thing is impossible. A man of comprehensive views and practical wisdom will not attempt it. Yet this has often been done, to the great injury of peace and charity.

We readily admit all that can be said of the importance of truth as opposed to error. Yet it may, perhaps, be questioned whether our Maker ever intended that we should all think and feel just alike. It is not easy to say what, in our present state of trial, would be the effect of perfect uniformity; it might be injurious to intellectual improvement; and would remove the opportunity of exhibiting some of the most amiable traits in the Christian character, such as forbearance and brotherly kindness towards those who differ from us.

Indeed, it may be remarked, in general, that Christianity is a system perfectly adapted to the whole constitution of man. It designs to bring, ultimately, to their full maturity, all our powers, both intellectual and moral. It seems necessary, then, that arrangements should be made for vigorously exercising the understanding, for trying our love of the truth, and educing patience and forbearance when differences of opinion occur. But men are exceedingly apt to feel that their *opinions* are of course the right opinions, and to insist that others should think as they do. Our vanity, our love of distinction, are gratified when others bow to our judgment. Hence vigorous attempts are frequently made to compel or persuade them to adopt our peculiarities. In this way, and in a thousand others, party-spirit has risen up and disturbed the councils of the church. This pestilent spirit has so often pervaded associations of men, and has pro-

duced so much mischief in the church and the world, that it ought to be guarded against with unslumbering vigilance. It is a demon that, when once roused, it is difficult to lay. However trivial the subject of dispute, party-spirit identifies with it all the interests of the church or the country, and invests it with all the dignity and value which they possess. Religion is a thing of incomprehensible importance, and when this evil prevails, the heated passions of partizans identify modes of worship, and forms of speech, and idle and endless logomachies, with the purity of the church, the glory of God, and the salvation of souls. Scruples of conscience are pleaded on both sides. The parties take their stand with the spirit of martyrs. There is no thought of concession. To yield a hair's breadth would be a sacrifice of principle. The contention waxes warmer and warmer; and the church exhibits a scene of fierce and angry contention, instead of the delightful fruits of peace and love. They who are without, stand amazed at the spectacle; they wonder that men of sense should so magnify things indifferent; they rejoice, while Zion mourns; they speak in a tone of exulting sarcasm of the *odium theologicum*, and exclaim, "See how these Christians hate one another!"

We can now look back to former times, and wonder at the violence practised by the professed followers of a meek and lowly Saviour, when mere trifles put them asunder. These examples ought to make us extremely watchful over ourselves, and exceedingly diligent in following the things that make for peace.

There is another remark on this subject, which we ought always to bear in mind. When family quarrels take place, they produce greater exasperation, and are maintained with more unrelenting bitterness than any other quarrels. So when parties spring up in a particular church, and produce differences, these are accompanied by more unbrotherly feelings, and greater heat and violence than the party-spirit that divides different churches. This is mentioned as an additional reason for circumspection and caution.

IV. It is observed, although this is implied in some observations already made, that in the system of Christian doctrine, there are some things confessedly of much greater importance than others. I should indeed be exceedingly unwilling to undertake a complete enumeration of fundamental truth. Yet none will deny that there are truths which possess this character, and others that do not. Among fundamental truths, I should not hesitate to place, the fall of man from a state of original righteousness into one of sin and misery, the divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the doctrine of atonement, that of regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit, the necessity of holy living, and a future judgment. If these are denied, the sum and substance of the gospel are rejected; and we are left without any religion suited to the present condition of man. Take these away; and we know not what to say to one who, with an awakened conscience, says, "Sirs what must I do to be saved? But as to external things, it is allowed on all hands, that much is left to expediency, and human discretion. Now it is highly important that we should be able in some degree justly to appreciate truth; to *hold fast unto the death, the great and precious doctrines of the gospel*; and at the same time to LET LITTLE THINGS PASS FOR LITTLE THINGS. Without this, it is not possible to hold any society together. Even independent congregations cannot subsist, unless the members will consent to adopt this rule, nor can a family itself maintain peace without it.

This copious subject has already, perhaps, been pursued too far. Its importance may plead the preacher's excuse. If the spirit of these observations has been fully understood, very little further need be said on this division of our text. A great part of the happy art of peace-making and peace-preserving depends, as has been already observed, on abstaining from that which creates offence. Let this abstinence be practised, and if we have any thing of the love of Christ in us, any portion of the spirit of the gospel, our brotherly kindness will flow forth, we shall love one another with a pure heart fer-

vently, and we shall dwell pleasantly together in unity. *That* will diffuse its delightful fragrance among us, which is "like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments." *That* will afford its refreshing influences, which is "as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion." And upon us the Lord will command his blessing. O! brethren let us evermore follow the things that make for peace. Let us pray for the *peace* of Jerusalem.

SECOND PART.

I. But the text contains two parts. We must follow things that make for peace, and *things wherewith one may edify another*.

We have before seen with what earnestness the apostle inculcates this duty; and the various texts then recited, need not be repeated. It is worth while, however, to remark on the order of his words in the passage before us; first *Concord*, then *Edification*. This order, it seems to me, displays great knowledge of human nature. Without peace and concord, there can be no edification. Excite a man's jealousy, his anger, or any hostile feeling whatever, or rouse his prejudices, and you cannot, while this state continues, present truth in any form that will make it acceptable. Every avenue to the heart is shut up; and love is the only pioneer which can open the way, by which truth can make her approaches. The apostle therefore says, *first*, Let us follow the things that make for peace, and, *then*, the things whereby one may edify another.

The general duty of christians to edify one another will not be insisted on in this place. But using the term in the sense of "building one up in knowledge," I shall consider the precept as it may be applied to the General Assembly and to our relations one with another as members of this body. It may be allowed, however, while the word is used in this sense, to observe that the most

edifying exhibition that can be made of divine truth, may be made, while we are unitedly engaged in the business of the church, *by example*. When we see its proper effects, in meekness, humility, patience, forbearance, brotherly kindness, benevolence, duly tempered zeal, and other christian graces, we best understand its value, and are most disposed to embrace it. He is the most efficient advocate of any particular system, who in his whole conduct shows that it produces the most excellent practical effects. Now, brethren, in all our little differences, if there are any among us, as far as we wish to gain proselytes let us try this method. If it does not succeed ; it is in vain to try any other.

II. But we ought to edify one another, by the manner in which we transact the business of the church of Jesus Christ.

This remark embraces two particulars—The spirit with which we go through our business ; and the form of doing it—The first may be referred to edification by example. Let it be observed however, that in even the minutest details of our smallest matters, we ought never to forget the dignity of our office ; our high calling as christians and ambassadors of the Lord Jesus ; the honour of Christ's kingdom, the ideas associated in the minds of men in general with an assembly of clergymen ; and the relation which we sustain one to another as brethren in the gospel of the blessed Saviour. The spirit of our station ought to be on us. Perhaps no condition in which we can be placed more imperiously demands constant self-inspection, and diligent cultivation of the grace of prayer. If I might be permitted to recommend such a thing to my fathers and brethren, I would most earnestly and solemnly recommend to all not to propose a single measure or rise to make a speech during the sessions of this Assembly, without first attempting to realize that God takes cognizance of our thoughts and motives, and without ejaculating a prayer to the hearer of prayer for direction and assistance. Brethren ! if in the ordinary assemblies of christians, we are constrained to adopt the language of the patriarch, and say, How awful is this

place; what feelings ought to pervade our minds when we meet as a council of the church to manage the concerns of a large part of the kingdom of Christ? O may a spirit of wisdom and of grace rest upon us!

With regard to the external mode of doing business I wish to offer several observations for your consideration.

Situated, as a majority of us are, remote from the centre of influence and information, we have but little intercourse with our brethren. We are confined to our obscure corners, and limited by our little spheres of action. There we labour in a small way, and under many discouragements, until our feelings become cramped, and our views are narrowed. Now one very great advantage of the General Assembly is, that it affords us an opportunity to come out from our nooks and corners, and places of confined observation, and mingle in council with men, who enjoy the benefit of long experience, and frequent opportunities of taking general and comprehensive views of the great and diversified interests of Christ's kingdom. Men of high endowments, of rich gifts and great capacity, ought to consider what important benefits they have it in their power to confer on us who have not been so highly favoured; what enlargement they might give to our views, what an impetus they might, by their own powerful movements, communicate to our understandings. And they ought to treat all the important subjects brought under discussion, with befitting dignity and moderation, on those great general principles, which when luminously exhibited, shed light on the minds and give expansion to the thoughts of all who hear. In this Assembly the great doctrines of christianity; the principles of ecclesiastical polity, the state and general interests of the whole Presbyterian Church and her allies, and comprehensive plans for promoting the kingdom of our blessed Redeemer, are brought under consideration. These are mighty subjects. And surely it ought not to be reckoned extravagant that such expectations should be formed; that an improvement of such opportunities should be demanded.

Perhaps however the manner of conducting business in the Assembly, is unfavourable to this expectation. For, many matters, instead of being referred to committees, that are allowed time and opportunity to study, arrange, and digest them, that they may be presented in their various bearings and relations, are taken up first by the House, often seized by the wrong end, and discussed in a confused and irregular manner, so as utterly to baffle men of weak minds and slow apprehension. Ought not affairs to be so managed here, that the members of this body shall be put on trains of thinking to occupy them for many days to come? When the intelligence and piety of the Presbyterian church are concentrated in the General Assembly, a new impulse ought to be given to the minds of the members, which they shall communicate to their Presbyteries, on their return, and set them on new exertions for their improvement. Councils of this sort ought to be schools of wisdom, in which lessons should be learned for the benefit of the whole body represented. While here, we ought to identify ourselves with the whole church to which we belong, to bear their interests on our hearts, and put forth our very best exertions for the good of all.

But our duty as respects the general subject before us, is not limited to our continuance in this place. It would be poorly worth while for us to come hither from remote places, and at great expense to the church, if this were all. We are scattered over an immense extent of country. And although the Presbyterian church is now large, and growing, all know that the numbers of our ministers bear a very small proportion to the population, on which we might exert an influence. Of course our personal influence as a body of men is comparatively small. We are making great, and ought to make much greater exertions to remedy this evil. From the nature of the case however the process is slow: and the people whom we might edify, and ought to edify, are in the mean time exposed to many sinister and disastrous designs. It does seem to me then, that while convened in General Assembly, we ought to improve the opportunity afforded

of bringing the talents and intelligence of the gifted geniuses and learned men among us, to bear on all our members, and exert a continual influence on society. Certainly, we are not doing all that it becomes such a body of men to do for the promotion of sound learning in connection with true religion, and in subserviency to her interests. Literature, according to the direction which it receives and the influence under which it operates, is either an efficient enemy or a useful auxiliary to religion. This seems to have been always admitted in the Presbyterian church, and our predecessors made noble efforts for the time in founding and supporting institutions of learning. Their exertions and sacrifices may on comparison with ours well put us to shame. We have not carried out their plans.

For a long time we have been, and even now we are in a great degree dependent on Europe for works on Theology as well as on almost every branch of human science. But, if the indications of the times are not mistaken, a change is beginning to take place; and we may look for an annual increase of American literature. It will not be for the credit of the church, if other professions outstrip us, in this race of improvement. But more than mere reputation is at stake. Philosophy, History, and Poetry, must be made to feel the influences and subserve the interests of evangelical truth, or they will be placed in direct hostility to it. Already, owing to the little interest that the clergy take in these important matters, they begin to assume the colouring and receive the impress of infidelity. Nature, which when well interpreted, bears her testimony in favour of christianity, suffers violence and is compelled to speak against it. The same remark may be applied to History and Chronology. But in the mean time what are we doing? There are a few schools under the direction of religion; but what are they in such a country as ours? Their influence is salutary, but limited. Besides, among a reading people, books are instruments of greater power than

schools. The character of our literature then deserves most serious attention.

But it deserves particular consideration that there is a set of men (and they possess great facilities for carrying on their purposes) who are making vigorous efforts to give to the whole literature of the country a direction in favour of what we do conscientiously believe to be fatal error. They have the sagacity to perceive that the Americans are likely to become a great literary people; and as the tree of science is just shooting up, it is their effort and their aim to bend it to their own purpose. Rich in their resources, fully united in their schemes and of course possessing the energy of co-operation, steady in their designs, they press forward, and hope for complete success. They expect to occupy the seats of learning, and direct the influence of literature. And now they are almost continually throwing into circulation something calculated to further their plans, to give the hue and tone to public sentiment, that they wish. The Presbyterian church seems to be strangely indifferent to this important matter. We are either contending one with another on subordinate affairs, or are occupied with personal and private concerns, and care for none of these things.

I repeat, then, it does seem to me, that one of our most important duties, in the present posture of affairs, is to seize the opportunity afforded by the General Assembly, to form such a combination of the talents and learning and piety of the Presbyterian church, as will bring them to bear continually, and with all their weight, on the great body of the people, and thus promote their edification. The interests of evangelical truth, the interests of the church and the country require this of us.

But an undertaking of this kind ought to be engaged in and conducted on truly liberal and comprehensive views; it ought to rise above all party feelings; above the minute differences that prevail among evangelical men; it ought to discard the metaphysical subtilities, and impalpable distinctions of system-making, and support the common doctrines of Christianity, that were handed

down by the apostles, and revived at the Reformation. At the same time, it ought so to attend to the progress of science, and the prevalent literature of the age, as to make it interesting to men of letters. A work like this is most urgently demanded by the times. The vital principles of Christianity were, perhaps, never exposed to greater danger in this country than they are at present. The very circumstance that religion is becoming fashionable is one that may alarm us. We have in this country nothing to bind men to the support of sound orthodox divinity, but a feeling that this system of truth is necessary for the peace and salvation of a sinner. Socinianism* is the religion exactly suited to a man, who wishes to escape the odium of infidelity, and yet maintain the pride of his understanding, and indulge his favourite inclinations. It will find friends on every side. Its acute and industrious advocates perceive where their advantage lies, and they will make the most of it. The pestilence will spread like wild-fire. At our own doors, and by our own fire-sides, we shall have to maintain the contest with this most formidable enemy of "the faith once delivered to the saints." Considering the great extent of country and its population committed to our care, and the smallness of our numbers, it is impossible for us to render personal service every where. It is our duty, then, to embody our best thoughts and best feelings, and present them to all who can and will read, through our country; to address our fellow-citizens not merely in evanescent words, but permanent writings. By zeal, talents, and industry combined, we may thus exert a continual influence, may give to ourselves a sort of pluri-presence, that in a considerable degree may compensate for the paucity of our numbers, and the limited extent of our personal exertions.

Are these plans visionary? Why should they be

* *Socinianism* is used not to designate those who adopt the peculiar sentiments of Socinus, but as a generic term, including all who deny the divinity of our blessed Lord and Saviour, the doctrine of atonement, the depravity of human nature, and the necessity of regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

thought so? Are we as a body incapable of enlightening the public mind, and giving direction to the public taste? Then certainly we ought, with increasing zeal, to follow the things whereby one may edify another. Is the situation of our country thought to be such, that schemes like these cannot be executed? The energy of Socinianism will show us the contrary. Are we so divided, so intent on local interests, and personal schemes, that we cannot be brought to co-operate with sufficient zeal and perseverance? Then our Jerusalem is, in its present condition, like the ancient city, within which were divisions and contention, while without it was beleaguered by Roman armies. I am sometimes afraid, too, that the enemy will succeed; that here the banner of Socinianism will be unfurled and wave in triumph. Had such fears been expressed in the days of Mather and Elliott, the prophet would, perhaps, have been laughed to scorn. *But look at what was once the scene of their labours, and the theatre of their triumphs. Look at the present state of once flourishing Presbyterian churches in England! Look at Geneva!*

It is necessary that something should be done. As far as the influence of the clergy is separated from the general literature of the country, and it falls into other hands, infidelity, in some form or other, is almost sure to prevail; it will be broad, open, unblushing Deism; or it will try to wear the garb, and assume the port and bearing, of Christianity; it will be insinuating and sly; talk much of moderation, while violence is in its heart; and of liberal views, while all its feelings are sectarian; and of the pure morality of the gospel, while it is a very free liver;—and it will misname itself Unitarianism. In some form infidelity will prevail. Aware of this, we ought to go forth in all the strength with which God has endowed us, and all the zeal of which we are capable, and seize on every point which will give us any advantage in the conflict that we have to sustain.

But whatever may be thought of these particular views, none doubt of our obligations to follow the things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify an-

other. And our very meeting together ought to call forth our best affections, to stimulate our understandings, and put the mind in a right frame for conceiving designs of comprehensive benevolence, for forming noble purposes, and going forth to execute them. There is something grand, something which dilates the soul, in the very idea of the assembling of a number of the ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ, to consult on the interests of his kingdom. A congress of plenipotentiaries from all the states in Christendom; held to deliberate on the political interests of the world, would attract universal attention, and create universal expectation. But all that their deliberations would or could involve, whether of war or peace, of liberty or slavery, in comparison with the mighty, the incomprehensible interests, which here claim our attention, is no more than the dust on the balance, the atom in the sun-beam, compared with the solid dimensions of the material universe. Why, brethren, it is not the temporary interests of worms of the dust, it is not the concerns of a perishing world, that claim our attention; it is the concerns of many, very many, immortal souls; it is the interests of the kingdom of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; it is the honour of our God, that engage our deliberations, and demand our very best affections. The great question before us is not by what means we shall promote the little peculiarities of a party, and what dexterous manœuvres will defeat, in the Assembly, the plans of those who differ from us; but how shall our instrumentality be best employed in advancing the magnificent and glorious designs of divine mercy in the world? The very question is sufficient to put up the mind to high thoughts and noble conceptions.

But we are here called to enter into the detail of this great business; to bring it, in its various parts, before our eyes. Surely, as it comes nearer to us, our hearts ought to kindle with greater zeal, and glow with more fervent love. It ought to be remembered, however, that when our business is broken into its various parts, and its minutiae occupy our attention and fatigue our spirits.

we are in great danger of catching the unhallowed spirit of the world. When we first assemble, and join in the solemn song of praise to the Almighty, and mingle supplications to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our feelings rise to the occasion; they bear themselves loftily. Now the object of the speaker is to bring home to the bosom of every member of the house the conviction that this is no place for little things and narrow interests, and to send this truth, with all its important influences, through the whole detail of our business. A high and sustained tone of feeling ought to run through our proceedings. We ought to remember that our various transactions, however minute they may be when considered apart, as to their effect, constitute one great whole, and that they leave a general impression, favourable or unfavourable to the interests of true piety. We ought then to regard what we are engaged in, as invested with the sanctity of religion, with the grandeur and majesty of the everlasting kingdom of our Redeemer.

We ought to remember too, that as God has determined to carry on his purposes of mercy in the world, by the instrumentality of man, he makes use of our social affections, and of the law of sympathy to this end. This being so, a fine opportunity is afforded on these occasions for enkindling a flame, the genial warmth of which shall be felt through all our churches. We do not use as we ought the privilege here afforded to us, if we do not depart, if we do not return to our places, with warmer feelings of brotherly love and a greater disposition to pray for each other, with higher zeal for the glory of God, deeper concern for the welfare of Zion, and stronger resolutions to devote all that we have and are to the cause of Christ.

This General Assembly is the bond of union of the Presbyterian Church. It is supported at considerable expense. It ought to have great influence on the people. They will regard it with veneration, they will cheerfully and warmly support it, if they witness its happy effects on the minds and hearts of its members. They will wish us to come up hither, if we return with more light

in our understandings, and more love in our hearts, with more earnest desires to do good to them, and advance the kingdom of the Lord. The great body of the people, who now take little interest in our meeting, would conclude that the General Assembly, where such happy effects are produced, is fully worthy of all confidence and affection. Let us then follow the things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another.

There is another consideration. This is a great and a rapidly growing church. Its influence and connections extend over a large part of the western world: our population is growing with unexampled rapidity: our connections and influence are enlarging. It belongs to the General Assembly to give to the character of this church its tone and colouring; and to direct its exertion and its public feeling. Our feelings and conduct have an influence not only on our own people, but on other denominations, and the country at large. It is not possible for such a body as ours to exist in a country without exerting a powerful influence. Any society of men possessing a large part of the learning of a community will make itself to be felt. Eight hundred Presbyterian ministers, supported by their congregations, may produce mighty effects in such a nation as ours. Let us take heed that our influence, whether operating directly on our own body, or indirectly on others, shall be salutary.

Verily, we are loaded with a mighty responsibility; Great interests are committed to us. We may be instrumental in effecting good or doing mischief, which will be felt forever. *Here*, is our opportunity; and *now*, is our time. Ministers of the gospel are dying men. Of this we have abundant evidence, in the reports, which annually come up to the Assembly. Lately we have heard of the departure from this life, of some who were dear to us; and from whose labours of love and active zeal, we fondly anticipated great pleasure for ourselves, and much good for our fellow men. But it has pleased God to order otherwise. They are gone—and we must soon follow them. In the recollections of a dying hour,

our conduct as officers in the church of Jesus Christ, and members of this Judicatory, may bear an important part. *Here*, is our opportunity; and *now*, is our time.

The names numbered in this, will never be numbered in another General Assembly, until we all meet in one very differently organized, and held for a different purpose. If it please God to spare us, we shall perform our part, and then go away, to meet no more until we meet at the tribunal of God.—There every heart shall be laid open, and every motive will appear. Brethren, let us follow the things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another.

May the fountain of all wisdom, give to us, in his own way, liberally and without upbraiding; and may the God of peace be with us all. *Amen.*