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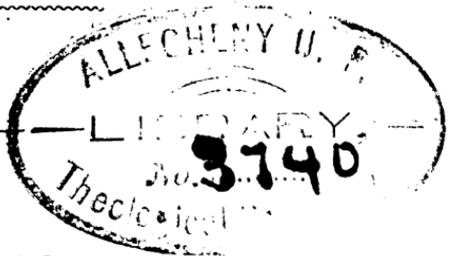
SERMONS BY THE MINISTERS

OF THE

FOUR SYNODS OF THAT DENOMINATION.

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EDITED BY

REV. JAMES PRESTLEY.  
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# SERMON XXIII.

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## A LEARNED MINISTRY.\*

BY REV. W. R. HEMPHILL,

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“The priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” *Mal. 2: 7.*

It is unnecessary on this occasion, and before this audience, to give a minute account of the origin, orders and duties of priests under the Old Testament dispensation. Those who are familiar with the word of God, and acknowledge its authority, will grant, at once, that there was such an order of men among the Jews of old; that the order was established by the God of heaven; and that it was the duty of the men thus ordained, to instruct the people—to distinguish between the several sorts of leprosy, the uncleannesses that were contracted in different ways—to attend to the causes of divorce, the waters of jealousy—to vows, and to offer sacrifices for their own sins and the sins of the whole congregation.

When the “fullness of time” arrived, Jesus appeared—the great high priest,—and abolished the ceremonial law. He offered himself a sacrifice, once for all—he blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was

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contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross. He instituted new ceremonies and sacraments,—he appointed a new order of men to act in the room of the priests, whose order and whose principal duties were dispensed with, when the new order was appointed. When he was about to ascend to his Father's throne, he called this new order of ministers and said to them—"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth, go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway even to the end of the world."

Here we have the commission of the apostles to go and preach, given from the lips of the Lord of glory himself, and here we have too the promise that he would be with the successors of the apostles until the great drama shall be closed—until time shall end, and the affairs of this world be wound up forever.

It is our happy lot, my friends, to live in a land to which the messengers of God have been sent;—the church or kingdom of Christ has long been established here—"the lines have fallen unto us in pleasant places: yea, we have a goodly heritage." We have too "line upon line, line upon line; precept upon precept, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little." As the Lord of the harvest has removed one, and then another of his servants from the field of labor on earth to their reward in heaven, he has called fresh laborers into the field, and this course will be pursued to the end of time, notwithstanding all the opposition of wicked men and devils, for the Saviour himself has declared that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."

We have met on this occasion to locate another laborer in the great harvest field—the world, and it is customary for the person who delivers what is called the ordination sermon, to point out some of the duties and qualifications of a gospel priest or minister. For this purpose the text from Malachi

has been selected, from which text it will be seen at once that the object now in view is the support of a *learned ministry*, in opposition to the absurd but prevailing notion in certain quarters that ignorance should instruct, and the blind lead the blind.

It would be impossible, in one discourse, to consider fully all the qualifications of a preacher of the gospel. The text points out one duty or qualification of a gospel minister, and likewise directs attention to a certain duty which devolves on the people.

The text contains a direction or command indicating what kind of a man the priest of *old*, or the messenger of the Lord *now*, ought to be.

In the Latin vulgate, and in the old English Bible it is said that the rendering is, "the priest's lips *shall keep* knowledge," and some of the Roman Catholics in former times, (and doubtless at the present time too) employed this text to establish the Pope's infallibility!

Their argument was that the priest's lips *shall keep knowledge* as God has promised:—he should never err, or act unwisely, and they maintained that God keeps his promises, therefore the priest, especially the Pope is *infallible!* If it was even a correct translation that the priest's lips *shall keep* knowledge, it is altogether an improper construction to say that he is infallible. If the text contains a promise that God's priests shall not err, then surely the priests to whom this language was specially addressed ought to have been infallible; but instead of that, the prophet says to them in the verse following the text, "Ye are departed out of the way, ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts."

The language of the text then is not a *promise* of God that his messenger should be infallible, but it is a direction or command showing that a preacher ought not to be an ignorant man, but a man of intelligence. That he should keep knowledge, and keep it *for* the people, who are to wait on his ministrations, and not *from* them, as the priests of Rome do.

He should keep knowledge in his *lips*, and not merely in his head, or in his library—he should be ready to give a word of exhortation, of reproof, of encouragement on any fit occasion; his knowledge should be such as would enable him to expound the law, or the whole word of God, for it is this word, and not politics or science that the people are to seek at his mouth.

It may seem strange, but it is not more strange than true, that there are many people in the world who are opposed to a learned ministry. They would have the preacher as ignorant as many of his hearers. They would set up a man to *teach* who ought himself to be taught what are the first principles of the oracles of God. They would have men appointed to feed their fellow-men with strong meat, while many appointed thus to feed others, require to be fed themselves, not with *meat* but with *milk*, and milk too with the cream removed! Instead of calling one whose lips keep knowledge, and who is capable of teaching both law and gospel, they prefer a man who has made little or no proficiency in obtaining a knowledge of divine truth, and who is utterly incapable of unfolding, presenting or defending the doctrines of the Bible.

Your attention is directed to a few arguments in favor of a learned ministry.

1. First, a minister of the gospel should be learned because he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. This is the reason assigned in the text. "The priest's lips should keep knowledge—for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." The Lord of hosts is a being of infinite perfections—"glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders." He is infinite in wisdom, and wonderful in counsel, and we might reasonably expect that as a general thing he would employ those in the administration of his affairs who were in some degree fitted by their intelligence for the discharge of their official duties. What a feeling of indignation would arise in every heart in the land, should it be announced that the President of the United States had sent an ignorant, unlettered man as minister to the court of Great Britain, France, or Russia! Every

intelligent citizen would feel himself insulted, and feel that the nation was degraded by such a move on the part of the chief magistrate. We can submit to be represented at home even in Congress, by a man of ordinary abilities, but we are not satisfied with a representative to a foreign court unless he is well fitted for his station. He must not only have the interest of his country at heart, but he should *know* what her interests are, and he should be qualified to advance and maintain them.

Now, if it is natural to expect that the most intelligent men would be sent to represent us abroad, should we not conclude that the Lord of hosts would employ men of wisdom to represent the court of Heaven? True, God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts. He can work with the best means or the worst, or without means at all, but generally, when he has a great work to accomplish either in church or state, he employs intelligent and stable men to fulfill his purposes. Who led the children of Israel from Egypt to the borders of Canaan? Moses—a man, says Stephen, “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.”

Who was appointed to build a temple at Jerusalem and consecrate it to the worship of Almighty God? Solomon—“the wisest man,” as the mere child can affirm. Who was appointed to war with Jewish prejudices and unbelief on the one hand, and with gentile superstition and idolatry on the other? Paul—“brought up at the feet of Gamaliel,” and possessing such a fund of rich and varied knowledge that all the enemies of truth could not gainsay or resist him successfully. Who was ordained by the Lord of hosts to deliver the Church and the world from the thralldom of Popery, and prepare the way for that civil and religious liberty which we now enjoy? Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Knox, and a host of worthies whose lips kept knowledge,—trained, educated men. They were men of learning, capable of tearing off from the mother of harlots her scarlet robes, and her meretricious ornaments, and exposing her deformities.

We see then that God employs men of learning to represent the court of Heaven. Especially should such men be learned in the *law* or word of God: because the word of God is the message of peace and pardon which he sends to the rebellious sons of men.

If the messenger who bears this treaty of peace does not understand its terms, or his duty in the matter, how is he to bring about a reconciliation between offending man and his offended Maker? If he is destitute of the proper fund of knowledge, he may bring disgrace on the cause which he is attempting to advocate, and ruin on the souls he is seeking to save.

2. In the second place, a priest, or rather a preacher's lips should keep knowledge that he might establish truth and confute error.

A minister is set for the defense of the truth, and as a matter of course he should know what truth is and should be able to defend it, and to detect and expose every shade of error.

There have been, and are now in the Christian church men whose opinions *appear* to be correct, but when their principles are fully developed they are found to lead to the most unhappy consequences. But who shall, or can refute these evil principles and expose their bad tendency? Not the man of mean capacity, but the scholar and the divine,—the man whose talents are equal to those of the false teachers whom he opposes.

It may be affirmed that it is generally *learned* men who broach and disseminate erroneous notions. The doctrines of the Bible must accord with their metaphysical and philosophical opinions, however heterodox these may be, and thus, under the sanction of their great names, they send abroad the most corrupt principles. If this be true, what does it prove? Nothing, save that wherever there is *one* learned man engaged in perverting the truth, there ought to be *another* capable of counteracting an influence so baleful. Arius and Pelagius, who lived near the beginning of the Christian era, were learned men, men of address and influence, and at the same

time men of the most corrupt principles: and what would have been the consequences had they been the *only* learned men in the church in their day?

Why, had there been no one raised to resist them and pour confusion on their principles, truth would have become almost extinct. But in God's good providence men were raised up to detect and expose their false notions, and establish many weak and wavering souls in the true faith of the gospel.

We have been pleading for a *learned ministry* in order that they might oppose those *within* the pale of the church who hold erroneous doctrines—those whom charity constrains us to admit may still be the friends of Christ, notwithstanding their erroneous opinions; now it is just as necessary that the ministry should be learned, that they might be able to contend earnestly for the faith against those who are out of the church—the declared and decided enemies of the cross of Christ.

The country is full of learned infidels, universalists, unitarians, of learned scoffers and seducers preaching up the doctrine of devils; and how could a preacher of truth and righteousness meet such men in the field of controversy unless he possessed a considerable store of biblical, classical and scientific learning? When such false interpreters place a wrong construction on a portion of scripture, as their custom is, and refer the unlearned preacher to the original language, or to history or geology for the correctness of their opinions, he would be struck dumb at once. He might however keep up the contest with some degree of success if he could refer to the opinions of learned men on the subject under debate. But here he is deficient also; for the preachers against whom I am now speaking, (and they are numerous in this country) have very little knowledge of any kind. They have dropped the plough, or left the anvil for the pulpit, without any suitable preparation, and consequently they are utterly unprepared to defend the very first principles of the Christian religion against anything of a learned antagonist. Had preachers of the gospel always been ignorant men, we

would this day be without the gospel; for who would have translated the scriptures for us?

Learned infidels and scoffers would have been very far from furnishing the world with a full and correct version of the Bible in the English, or in any other language. The duty of translating the scriptures has generally, if not always, fallen to the lot of the ministers of Christ.

If the missionaries to the heathen were not or had not been men of intelligence, the heathen never would have obtained the Bible in their mother tongue; the light of divine truth never would break in upon them as it is now doing, and the coming millenium, glorious on account of the universal spread of knowledge, would never come, but moral darkness would cover the earth, and gross darkness the people. And moreover, if ministers of the gospel were all ignorant men, as some contend they should be, we would not only be destitute of the scriptures, but who would have furnished us with those excellent systems of divinity which we now possess? Who would have provided for us those excellent volumes of sermons, essays and comments by which we are so much delighted and profited, by which the truth is so clearly unfolded, and the sons of error so completely confounded?

3. In the third place, ministers of the gospel should be learned, to enable them to instruct the ignorant, strengthen the weak, and exhort and excite the slow and cold.

To perform these duties aright they should be acquainted with the Bible—its great and leading principles should be familiar to their minds. The Bible is the text-book; in it the preacher should be versed, while at the same time he should not be ignorant, or at least he should not glory in being ignorant, of whatever would assist or enable him to illustrate and enforce the doctrines and precepts of the gospel.

The person who has received a thorough collegiate and seminary training is certainly far better prepared to think and communicate his thoughts, than he would have been without such training. Sometimes individuals of very limited knowledge are greatly blessed in building up Zion, and in encour-

aging and strengthening the people of God; but it is much more frequently the case that *learned* men are more successful in extending the church of Christ and in advancing the welfare of God's peculiar people.

Who are to instruct the multitudes of *ignorant* persons in the world, in the great doctrines and duties of religion? Surely, not the ignorant,—for, says Christ, “if the blind lead the blind, they will both fall into the ditch.” Many are *weak* and *wavering*,—who shall strengthen and establish such souls? Certainly not those who are as weak and feeble as themselves. There are many who are *slow* and *cold*, and who shall undertake to excite, to urge on, and animate such to the discharge of Christian duty? Who, but those who are able clearly to define what duty is, and to show the consequences of neglecting it? Some appear to think that *exhortation* is a part of ministerial duty which any one can perform whose lungs are sufficiently strong to endure long and loud vociferation. But it would seem from Paul's exhortation to Timothy, that *exhortation* does not consist in the furious utterance of a few simple truths. No; “Reprove, rebuke, exhort,” says the apostle, “with all long suffering and *doctrine*.” Doctrine then must be presented by the exhorter—truth must be set forth, and the saint or sinner exhorted to embrace, or conform to it. But many of our modern exhorters are utterly incapable of joining exhortation and doctrine together,—and they are consequently unable to enlighten the ignorant, or strengthen the weak, although they are often successful in exciting the *cold*, or stirring up the “stony ground” hearers.

We may notice, in the sequel, some *objections* to a learned ministry.

It is objected that learned men in the ministry are disposed to trust in their own abilities—in their learning, and not on the Spirit of God. This is doubtless true to a certain extent. But are learned preachers more disposed to rely on themselves than the ignorant?

As a general thing, a clergyman, or any other man of profound learning, is a man of *humility*—his great learning ena-

bles him to see that he knows but little comparatively, and he is humble while individuals of scanty information are oftentimes stubborn, self-willed, and presumptuous. They verify the saying; that,

“A little learning is a dangerous thing.”

Another common objection to learned preachers is, that common minds cannot comprehend their language—their expressions are too learned to be understood by unlettered persons. This objection lies with equal or greater weight against very unlearned preachers. Such preachers frequently indulge in high sounding language, and while they are ranting against learned preachers, as they often do, they endeavor to show their own small stock of knowledge, and by their half-fledged arguments, and their *sesquipedalian* words, (in the wrong place,) they are more difficult to be understood than those who are truly learned, who know the meaning of words, and their proper place in the sentence.

It may be remarked here that no speaker should be required to employ only such words as the ignorant part of his audience understand, or can explain. It is enough if his hearers obtain his *idea*; when that is the case, they can clothe it in language to suit themselves. No doubt many of the Greek words in Paul's Epistles, as well as some of his doctrines, were “hard to be understood,” by many to whom they were addressed, who were little skilled in language.

But we are told that Christ chose twelve *ignorant* men to be his apostles, and therefore the same kind of men should now be selected and sent forth to preach the gospel. It is admitted that Peter, and John, and James were not the most learned men in the Jewish nation. They, with the other disciples, appear to have been of the middle class of society, neither the most learned, nor the most ignorant. They did not leave their nets, however, and go directly to the pulpit to instruct the people; they remained three years with the Great Teacher, studying divinity and preparing for the great work before them. And when they were commissioned and sent

forth, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, and sat on them in the form of cloven tongues, so that the Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, &c., heard them speak in their own tongues the wonderful works of God.

So, then, these *ignorant* men, as they are called, could speak fluently in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and were masters of various other dialects; while those in our day who pretend to be like them, as to ignorance, instead of being able to speak in French, Spanish and Italian, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, can scarcely *read* plain English! There is a world of difference between our ignorant preachers and the inspired apostles. Indeed, the most learned men who emanate from our colleges are far behind the apostles in the use of tongues, endued, as they were, by the miraculous influences of the Holy Spirit.

Every one who professes to preach the gospel should be so well informed that he could "bring forth out of his treasure things new and old;" and could say with Paul to the Colossians, "We preach (Christ,) warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

It is then the doctrine of the Bible, and the dictate of common sense, that those who pretend to instruct others should be instructed themselves. If they would, like a wise householder, draw from their treasure things new and old, they must, as a matter of course, have a treasure to draw upon—if they would present every man perfect in Christ Jesus, they must be in some degree prepared like Paul, to warn and teach every man, "in all wisdom." Amen.