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Danger of being over wise.

A

SERMON

PREACHED JUNE 7TH, 1835,

IN THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ALBANY.

W. B. Sprague

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

PASTOR OF THE SAID CHURCH.

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1835.

Albany, June 11, 1835.

Rev. Doctor SPRAGUE,
Dear Sir,

In compliance with the wishes of many of your church and congregation, and in full accordance with their own views and feelings, the Session and Board of Trustees, have instructed me to request for publication a copy of the sermon delivered by you last sabbath morning. They cannot but regard it as a highly seasonable warning on a most important subject; and having listened to it with much pleasure, they earnestly hope you will put it in the way of exerting a still more extensive influence.

In their behalf, I subscribe myself,

With great respect,

Your friend and servant,

JOSEPH ALEXANDER,

President of the Board of Trustees.

Albany, June 12th, 1835.

My dear Sir,

In complying with the request which you have so kindly communicated to me from the Session and Trustees of our church, it is due to myself to say, that the Discourse to which you refer must appear under the disadvantage of having been written not only within the compass of a few hours, but while I was suffering severe bodily pain. I do not, however, in the circumstances of the case, feel at liberty to decline your request that it should be published; and I cannot forbear to say that it has given me great pleasure to know not only that the Session and Trustees, but the Church and Congregation which they represent, are so unanimous in the opinion that the threatening innovation to which the Discourse principally relates, ought to be promptly and firmly resisted.

I am, Dear Sir, with great regard,

Very truly yours,

W. B. SPRAGUE.

JOSEPH ALEXANDER, Esq.

President of the Board of Trustees, &c.

SERMON.

ECCLESIASTES, vii. 16.

Neither make thyself over-wise: Why shouldst thou destroy thyself?

There is no quality which is more frequently commended in the sacred scriptures than Wisdom. It is represented as emphatically the wealth of the immortal mind; the fountain of peace and joy; the seed of whatever can dignify the character, or elevate the destiny of man. He who hath this treasure in the scriptural sense of the word hath life; hath all needful good in the life that now is, all conceivable good in the life that is to come.

But if this be so, you will ask, perhaps, whether the language of my text, and the general tenor of scripture on this subject, are quite consistent with each other; or rather whether they do not involve an absolute contradiction. I answer, they are entirely consistent; for it is genuine wisdom which the scripture every where enjoins; it is the affectation of wisdom which

the wise man in our text so pointedly condemns. Make yourself as wise as you will in any legitimate sense of the word: cultivate that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, no matter to how great an extent: be as zealous as you please in the acquisition of every species of useful knowledge: but be not wise in your own conceit; be not wise above that which is written; be not *so* wise as to attempt to make things plain which God in *his* wisdom has seen best should be left obscure; or to make things appear absurd which God has been pleased to reveal as matters of faith; or to abate a single particle from the strictness of God's truth, or to mar in the least degree the purity of his institutions. For why shouldst thou destroy thyself? Why, by setting up thy wisdom against the wisdom of the Highest, by walking in the rush light of thine own reason, rather than in the sun light of his testimonies,—why shouldst thou bring upon thyself evil, the depth of which thou hast no line to fathom?

The text will naturally lead me to mention some *instances* in which men make themselves over-wise, and as I pass along, to *rebuke* the indulgence of this wayward spirit.

Men make themselves over-wise in their manner of treating God's *truth*, and God's *institutions*.

In their manner of treating God's *truth*.

The operation of this spirit in respect to divine truth, leads, in different cases, to different and opposite results. The point of true wisdom is to make our faith the exact counterpart of God's revelations; to believe that, and only that, which He has revealed, either directly or indirectly, in the sacred scriptures. But there are many who show themselves over-wise by departing from this simple principle, and making a use of their Reason in connexion with God's truth, for which Reason never was designed. And the result is, that some, because they find difficulties which they cannot explain, deny the divine authority of the scriptures altogether; while others darken counsel by words without knowledge, and incorporate into their creed hair breadth distinctions and metaphysical dogmas, and the result of all is, either that in attempting to explain God's truth, they have explained it all away, or else that they have, in a great degree, neutralized its influence by mixing it up with the deductions of their own erring reason. It is an error to believe too little, and an error to believe too much; and he who makes himself over-wise is sure to fall into the one or the other.

Let me illustrate this branch of my subject by one or two particulars.

Take, for instance, the scripture doctrine of the *Trinity*. The Bible has revealed with as much clearness, for aught we can see, as human

language admits, the doctrine of a three-fold distinction in the divine nature. The manner in which this distinction exists, God has not made the subject of Revelation; but the fact he has declared in the most explicit and unequivocal terms. But there are multitudes, as you know, who make themselves over-wise on this subject; rushing into gross absurdity on the one hand, or absolute unbelief on the other. One man approaches the doctrine with the spirit of a caviller; contemptuously asks how one can be three or three one; and then gives forth an oracular and triumphant smile, as if he had demolished the whole fabric of orthodoxy with a blow. He in *his* wisdom rejects the doctrine of the Trinity altogether; and avows himself a Socinian, or peradventure, a Deist. Another approaches this doctrine, and finds it so clear that he not only believes it, but believes far more in respect to it than God has ever revealed. Instead of being contented to receive the simple truth as he finds it in the Bible, he gives us the philosophy of the truth, and undertakes to show that it is quite susceptible of being proved by human Reason, and that even if the Bible had been silent in respect to it, the world by wisdom might have guessed it out; and not improbably, in such hands, it is sadly belittled by being exhibited under low and earthly similitudes. Both the classes represented by these individuals are wise above what is

written: the one in their wisdom blot out the doctrine as an absurdity; the other in *their* wisdom receive it; but they strip it in a great degree of its awful mysteriousness, and its mighty power, and give it to us only in connexion with their own vain and conceited speculations.

I borrow another illustration of this point from the manner in which men often treat the doctrine of *divine and human agency* in the work of our salvation. The scripture doctrine on this subject is, that man works out his own salvation, and that God works within him both to will and to do. But the over-wise are not satisfied with this simple verity; and hence the almost numberless attempts that have been made either to modify it, or to abolish it from the Bible, or to abolish the Bible that contains it. One will have it that man is the only efficient agent in his own conversion; and that it is absurd to suppose that any divine influence should be brought to bear directly upon the human will. Another maintains that man in his conversion and sanctification is little, if any thing more, than a mere passive recipient of impressions; and that the Holy Ghost not only works, but works alone in the process of fitting him for Heaven. Another is surprised that it should ever have occurred to any body that there was the appearance even of mystery in this doctrine; and professes to be able to show not only the fact that a divine and human agency both ex-

ist, but to tell us *how* they exist, and accurately to define the spheres of their respective operation. And yet another insists that this doctrine, as it lies in the Bible, is an absurdity which human reason was never made to digest; and he points to it as part of *his* warrant for giving the Bible to the winds, and embracing the cold creed of the infidel. Each one of these in making himself over-wise, has turned his back upon the the teachings of God's wisdom.

I might extend this illustration to other truths of the Bible, and show how men make themselves over-wise in respect to them; but instead of enlarging on this article, I will proceed to show you how the same spirit often discovers itself in reference to the *institutions* of God.

You may see it in the manner in which men often treat the *Christian Sabbath*. God in *his* wisdom has ordained that one day in seven should be sacred to the purposes of piety and devotion; and has commanded all men to hallow this day by religious observances; but men, in *their* wisdom, practically, and sometimes speculatively, decide that this institution is not necessary, and refuse even to recognize its existence. There are multitudes with whom the sabbath is a day of business or of sport; who employ its sacred hours in forming plans for accumulating wealth, or in yielding to profane and impious merriment, or to the grovelling and sensual enjoyment of

themselves. There are others who, while they profess in general to acknowledge the obligations of Religion, cannot see why one day should be more sacred than another, and in their practice actually regard all days alike. And there are others still who profess in some sense to observe the day, who yet practically set at naught that standard of observing it, which God has given us in his word. What else do any of these various classes, than virtually arraign God's wisdom? If He has instituted the sabbath, and they, either by their words or actions, decide that this institution is not necessary, or at least that it need not be observed with so much strictness as his commandment enjoins,—what better, I ask, is this than assuming to be wise above their Maker?

The same general remark applies to *Public Worship*. God has been pleased to ordain that men should assemble for the purposes of devotion and religious instruction, and has commanded that they should not forsake the assembling of themselves together; and for their edification has instituted, in connexion with the sabbath, the preaching of the word—an ordinance which is evidently designed to be the grand instrument in the world's regeneration: But need I say how this institution is disregarded and profaned by multitudes who are cast within the circle of its hallowed influences? Let the throng of the profane and profligate who may be seen every sab-

bath in the streets even of our own city, where the temples of religion are open to invite attendance on every side,—testify how extensively the worship of God's house is regarded as a vain thing. And of those who actually attend, how many entirely lose sight of the design of the institution, and come hither only in conformity to what they regard a decent usage! * And how many who acknowledge that it is an ordinance of God, yet suffer themselves to be detained from the observance of it, by causes which would have no influence to detain them from the most trivial worldly engagement! And how many others who allege as an apology for their absence, that they can occupy themselves more profitably in reading and reflection at home, than in listening to the preaching of the word! And how many others still, who will have it that all devotion is alike unprofitable and unnecessary; and that, as God knows our wants before we express them, and is inclined from his very nature to be merciful, the expression of them can be of no avail! How flagrantly, how shamefully, do all these classes impugn the wisdom of God, by arrogantly setting up their own wisdom in opposition to it!

I may instance *Baptism* as another institution in connexion with which this spirit which I am condemning often takes occasion to discover itself. The command of Christ to the apostles, and through them to all their successors in the

ministerial office, was, that they should go into all the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. But there are those who ask what good can possibly result from such a ceremony. 'Surely,' say they, 'the application of water either to the face, or the whole body, can do nothing to wash out the spots of the soul, or to implant holy principles and affections.' And there is a large and highly respected denomination of Christians, who, while they acknowledge that Baptism is a divine rite, still urge the same inquiry in respect to its application to children, and ask how an infant can possibly be benefitted by being sprinkled with water, before it knows any thing of the nature of the act. Now, whoever, professing to believe the Bible, endeavors to show that the ordinance of Baptism in general, or of infant baptism in particular, is not there enjoined, so far reasons fairly; because he appeals to that which, with every christian, must be the ultimate standard of truth; but surely it will not do for one who acknowledges the divine authority of the Scriptures, to decide that this institution is of no value, merely because he cannot, or does not, discern its uses. I am far from admitting that these uses may not be discerned; but even if they could not be, I would say the grand question is, whether God's word authorizes the institution; and if so, to refuse to submit to it were to make one's self over-wise. Men

certainly are not required to believe absurdities ; but *is* it an absurdity to suppose that God should institute some rite of introduction into his visible church significant of the blessings which the relation hereby constituted involves ? Or is it an absurdity to suppose that He who promised to be the God of Abraham's seed, and who instituted the ordinance of circumcision to be applied to infants under the ancient dispensation as a seal of the covenant of grace—is it an absurdity, I say, to suppose that he should still have contemplated the infants of believers under the Christian economy ; and that the distinction which they enjoy, in consideration of their being born in the bosom of the church, should still be recognized by a solemn rite ;—a rite which is full of meaning to a parent's heart, and which, when the child becomes capable of understanding it, is fitted to come home to *his* heart also with deep and abiding impression ?

And finally, men make themselves over-wise by the manner in which they treat *the Sacrament of the Supper*. The command of Christ to observe this ordinance is imperatively binding upon all men : not an individual who has the opportunity of doing it, is exempt from the obligation. But I surely need not say that there are multitudes who refuse to observe it ; and that too, on the very ground that it is not essential to salvation, and that they can as well go to Heaven if they do.

not, as if they do, join themselves to the visible church. But who art thou, vain man, to oppose thy Redeemer's wisdom, and set at naught thy Redeemer's authority? You expect to go to Heaven when you die. You cannot go to Heaven without being a disciple of Christ. You cannot be a disciple of Christ without obeying his commands. One of these commands you deliberately disobey on the ground that it is of little or no importance. Judge then whether, with the spirit you now possess, you have reason to expect that you shall ever reach Heaven.

Another way in which men make themselves over-wise on this subject is by *modifying the ordinance* to suit their own views; especially by inculcating the doctrine, or adopting the practice, of dispensing with the appropriate elements, or of substituting something in place of them, which the Scripture does not warrant; or to come fully to the point which I now have more particularly in view, and on which the movements of the present day will not allow me any longer to be silent—**THE EXCLUSION OF WINE FROM THE LORD'S SUPPER.** Do you say that it is impossible there should be any danger of such extravagance in an enlightened community like this, and that I am giving a false alarm in expressing the opinion that there *is* danger? You shall know then the grounds of my apprehension, and judge for yourselves of their validity. In the first place,

there are several churches in different parts of the country, which, if I am correctly informed, have actually adopted the measure, and are of course strongly committed to its defence and extension. In the next place, there are in many of our churches, individuals, who suffer the cup to pass them in the communion service, on the ground that they believe the use of wine, even on that occasion, to be sinful. And then there are periodicals extensively circulated, lending their influence, in a greater or less degree, to this unhallowed innovation; and one religious newspaper especially, which has never, to my knowledge, been ranked among ultra publications, is giving forth a series of articles from the pen of an aged and highly respectable clergyman, designed to show that the exclusion of all that can intoxicate from the holy communion is essential to the triumph of the Temperance cause. And the writer of these articles is understood to be the author of a premium Tract about to be published, in which he endeavors to establish the same position, and which is soon to be scattered through our churches, and for aught I know to be sent to the dwelling of every one of you. And there are other great names too which stand pledged before the community to the same doctrine; and are doing all that industry, and zeal, and talents, and learning can do, to maintain and extend it. A distinguished professor of Biblical

literature in one of our theological seminaries—a man whose name is known scarcely less abroad than at home, and is justly regarded as reflecting a lustre upon the character of his country—has told us in an Essay which has just appeared that, though he thinks wine *may* be used in the communion in such a way as to avoid reproach, and is not himself disposed entirely to abandon it, yet it is by no means necessary to the acceptable celebration of the ordinance; and is to be classed among the unessential accidents of the service, such as receiving the elements in a reclining posture, holding the service in an upper room, and other similar things, in which few churches now think of imitating the apostles. Another professor connected with one of our colleges, and a man too whose talents and acquisitions and virtues no one holds in higher estimation than myself, has written an Essay for publication, in which he endeavors to show that neither bread nor wine is essential to the acceptable observance of the Lord's supper; and that the Temperance cause cannot advance much farther until the use of wine is abolished from this ordinance. And in addition to these particular facts, there is another of a more general nature, which awakens my apprehension not less than those which I have already stated—I refer to the gradual and silent change which is evinced by the manner in which this subject is treated in the or-

dinary intercourse of life. Men who, a year ago, felt nothing but shuddering when it was introduced, have come now to speak of it with timid caution, as if they were speaking on an unsettled question, upon which it were wise not fully to commit themselves; while some of them actually half adopt the principle, and others show that scarcely any of their former scruples now remain. And wherefore is this change? It is because the subject has gradually become familiar to them; and while the current in favor of this innovation has been imperceptibly becoming stronger, no effort has been made to resist it; and even ministers of the gospel have been silent, because they have apprehended no serious danger, or possibly because they have feared to sound the alarm, lest it should subject them to the charge of being hostile to one of the best of causes; and hence these individuals, by a process which they themselves can hardly analyze, and for reasons of which they can give little account, have been brought to their present posture of indecision at least, if not of actually favoring the views which, not long ago, they regarded with horror.

And here you have my reason for bringing this subject before you to-day:—it is not that I believe that any of you are prepared to banish wine from the communion: I am not conscious that there is an individual before me, who would

not be disposed to resist such a measure: but then I know that the whole history of the church shows that such innovations come in by little and little; and though you may now be right—fully right on this subject, yet it supposes nothing worse of you than that you partake of human nature, to take for granted the possibility of your becoming wrong; and it is with a view to prevent evil that I give you this timely warning. Be not deceived by the parade of oriental learning on this subject: Remember that no authority is worth a rush, that contradicts the plain declarations of Christ and his apostles, as they are found in the New Testament: and I ask how the Blessed Founder of our religion—a religion designed for common people who can only judge of the meaning of scripture, by the principles of common sense—I ask how it was possible that he should have instituted this ordinance to be observed in the church forever, and spoken of the fruit of the vine, and nothing else, as one of the elements, if, after all, he meant wine and water, or tamarind water, or molasses and water, or any thing else than that which his words properly and exclusively indicate. I say, Brethren, you have no occasion for Hebrew learning, or Arabic learning, or any other learning, than plain English, to settle this question: the Master himself has settled it; has settled it for the obscurest peasant as truly as for the most eminent

Biblical critic ; and no man, no body of men, has a right to call in question the Master's decision. I have heard the practice of the church in the second century appealed to in justification of this usage. But if the authority of the second century is good, surely that of the first is better ; and why not go a little farther back, and take advantage of that ? And if the testimony of uninspired men on this subject is good, the testimony of those who were inspired is better ; why not then be satisfied with simply opening God's word, and ascertaining what is there written on this subject ? Ah, it is because God's word says not a word about any other element to be used as drink in this ordinance, but the fruit of the vine.

I have heard it several times spoken of, as if it were a singular inconsistency, that either ministers or churches should complain of having something else at this day substituted for wine in the sacramental cup, when they have been for years administering and receiving wine that was grossly adulterated by spurious and even noxious admixtures ; and in many instances, probably, have actually used that as wine which had nothing of it but the name. Be it so, and what then ? Are not the individuals who say this well apprised, that if this has been the case, neither ministers nor churches have, until within a recent period, suspected it ; and that they themselves have been

sharers in the common ignorance that has prevailed on this subject? Is the alleged fact that we have administered brandy and water when we have honestly supposed that we were administering wine, a good reason why we should substitute simple water, or wine and water, with the full knowledge of what we are doing? If I have given forth, and you have received, some impure element, with the honest belief that it was wine, who will say that we are to be set down as voluntary offenders; but even if we are, is it not a singular mode of manifesting our repentance for violating Christ's authority in one way, to set ourselves forthwith to violating it in another?

Does any one say what harm, after all, can result from the agitation of this subject in our churches, or even from the substitution of water for wine at the Lord's table? Will it not be the same thing, it may be asked, when the first shock occasioned by the innovation is over; and may not the ordinance be celebrated with greater safety, and equal acceptableness? I answer, if wine is not essential to the celebration of the communion, by the very conditions of the ordinance, I know not what is. I answer again, the very same spirit which would banish wine from the Lord's table, would banish the other element,—would annihilate the ordinance itself; and hence my respected friend, the professor, tells us that neither bread nor wine is essential to the accept-

able celebration of the Lord's supper ; and hence another individual with whom I have conversed, more than intimated his willingness to have the ordinance entirely abandoned, rather than it should stand in the way of the cause of Temperance.

There is another reason why I cannot be silent on this subject—it is, that by remaining so, I am a stumbling block in the way of multitudes of my fellow Christians, who are looking to the ministers of Christ for warning when the doctrines or the institutions of religion are in danger. In the course of the last week, a highly intelligent and active Christian in the city of New-York, whose name is well known in the walks of public benevolence, said to me,—and he said it with a degree of emotion which he struggled in vain to suppress,—“ Sir, nothing has occurred since I indulged a hope that I was a disciple of Christ, which has operated on me so powerfully as a temptation to believe that all religion is a miserable delusion, as the fact that grave ministers of the gospel are trying to remodel, and in effect to blot out, that ordinance in which I have been accustomed to celebrate my Redeemer's death ; in connexion with the equally astounding fact, that no one of you who are set for the defence of the gospel, has ventured to open his lips publicly to arrest the progress of this impious fanaticism.” Ah ! methinks I hear some one say, whatever else that man might have been, he was

a cold friend to the Temperance cause. I will tell you how he evinced his coldness :—he did it by writing his name on the honored list of those who, not long since, subscribed a thousand dollars each, for helping forward that very enterprise. He is *no* cold friend to the temperance cause ; it is dear to him as the apple of his eye ; he is willing to give not only his influence and his prayers, but his money, by hundreds and thousands, to advance it ; but he cannot consent to see it built up at the expense of breaking down, or attempting to break down, one of God's own institutions.

Yet another reason, my friends, for bringing this subject before you :—the infidel is casting upon this movement a look of self-complacent triumph. He is beginning to boast that we are getting rid of our Christianity by piece-meal ;—and the signs of the times indicate to him, that under the wonder-working hand of modern theological refinement, both the doctrines and institutions of the gospel will gradually be frittered away, until his creed becomes our creed, and his hope becomes our hope. Is it worth while for Christians, by tampering with the ordinances of Christ, to give occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme ?

I cannot forbear to say too, that this innovation is a deep stab to the comfort of Christians in the commemoration of their Saviour's dying

love. When I come to the communion table, and administer or receive the sacramental cup, I wish to think of my Redeemer and his death, and the hopes and blessings which I enjoy through him: I wish not to have my mind distracted by having the question forced upon me, whether I am not committing a sin by taking into my lips a drop of wine; and I hesitate not to say, that they who have taken the lead in this effort, who are urging either from the pulpit, or the press, or even in a more private way, the expediency of banishing wine from the holy supper, are responsible in a great degree for these painful associations by which our communion is embarrassed and embittered;—are responsible for imposing upon many a weak conscience a load which renders the approach to the Lord's table any thing else than a cheerful and joyful and profitable occasion.

Brethren, I am sure I need not tell you that, in expressing my views so plainly on this subject, I have taken counsel of any thing else rather than my feelings; for most gladly would I have been silent, if I could have reconciled such a course with my convictions of duty as a minister of Jesus Christ. I have witnessed too much of the operations of human nature not to know that he who ventures to oppose extravagance, when it is in any way connected with a good cause, does it at the peril of being set down as an

enemy to that cause. I cannot forget that my own experience, since I have been among you, has proved that a man who takes it upon himself to rebuke the spirit of fanaticism in Revivals of religion, must expect to have his name blazoned on the list of the enemies of Revivals; and most fully do I expect that the remarks which I have now made, will be appealed to, not by you, but by others, to justify the charge against me of being a foe to the cause of Temperance. I say *not by you*, my friends; but even if it were otherwise, and I knew that every one of you would join in this charge,—much as I value your good opinion—and there is nothing that I value more except the approbation of my conscience and my God,—I should still feel myself constrained to protest without a qualifying or softening word, against this unhallowed invasion of one of God's institutions. But I am not a foe to the cause of Temperance: with religious indignation I repel the charge. I regard it as having come into existence under the special favor of Heaven. I honor it as a noble part of that moral machinery designed to help forward the world's renovation. I look upon those who have labored in it faithfully and diligently as the benefactors of their race: and I would still bid them God speed in the good enterprize, and invoke the smiles of Heaven on every effort which they put forth in the spirit of charity and of a sound mind. But

if the Temperance cause claims a precedence of the institutions of God, then I insist that it claims too much : if it cannot go forward but at the expense of perverting or annihilating an ordinance of our religion, then I insist that it is high time it should come to a solemn pause ; and I say unhesitatingly, perish the hand—no matter what hand it may be—that would profanely withdraw from the supper either of the memorials of my Redeemer's death ! Let God's institutions stand in their own simple majesty, though the noblest fabric which man ever built should be prostrate in the dust.

Brethren, whatever you may think of the freedom of these remarks now, I verily believe the day will come when every one of you will be satisfied that I have been pleading in behalf of the Temperance cause ; for after all that I have said, God's institutions *will* live, and whatever arrays itself against them, will come to naught. I counsel you then, *as the friends of Temperance*, to beware how you even seem to sanction this innovation ; for, rely on it, God will not smile on any effort that goes to impugn his authority, though it be professedly made for the advancement of his honor ; and even if it seem to succeed, it will be found ultimately to have had concealed in it the principle of self-destruction. Let the Temperance cause be kept upon its own proper ground, and within its own legitimate limits, and

God's blessing will be in it ; and the blessing of many ready to perish will come upon it ; and new and ardent friends from every side will cluster around it ; and its triumphs will not only be gratefully celebrated on earth, but we may reasonably believe will swell the anthems of Heaven. But let it attempt to rise on the ruin of God's institutions, and I forewarn you that the days of its heaviness and mourning are at hand ; and it will be well if we do not have occasion to go weeping to the grave where it is entombed, and in the bitterness of our spirits to ask concerning it, " Can these dry bones live ?"