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SERMON XXXVIII.

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THE HOUSE OF GOD DESIRABLE.

PSALMS 84: 1, 2. *How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.*

IN the patriarchal ages, the pious had no particular place or consecrated edifice, where they offered up their worship to God, but wherever they happened to reside, there they erected altars, on which they offered sacrifices, agreeably to the original institution; and, sometimes, consecrated pillars, by anointing them with oil, to be memorials of some remarkable transaction. But in the time of Moses, while Israel remained near Mount Sinai, a command was given to build a tent or tabernacle for the worship of God, of the most precious materials. The quality and workmanship of these were specified with the utmost particularity. The form and dimensions of this sacred structure were also revealed, and it was positively directed that every part of it, even to the loops and pins, should be made in conformity to the pattern shown to Moses in the mount. Around the sacred tabernacle, a spacious court was enclosed, within which stood the altar of burnt-offerings, and the laver for the purification of the priests. While the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness, the tabernacle moved or remained with them, and the pillar of fire and cloud which rested on it, by night and day, was their constant guide. But when they had conquered the promised land, SHILOH became the permanent residence of the house of God. For several hundred years, even to the time of Samuel the prophet, the tribes were accustomed to assemble for the celebration of divine worship at this place. But in the time of David, the ark of the covenant, after its return from the

SERMON XXXIX.

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THE NATURE AND DUTIES OF THE OFFICE OF RULING ELDER.

Acts 20:17,18,28. *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them,.... Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God.*

THE interesting circumstances under which the apostle Paul delivered the preceding advice, and the whole subject of his discourse on the occasion, can be ascertained by a perusal of the sacred narrative. He spoke to persons who had received their official character and qualifications from the Holy Ghost. He enjoined on them certain duties, and taught them that great care was necessary to their performance.

I. WHO WERE THE PERSONS DESIGNATED BY THE APPELLATIONS, "ELDERS," "OVERSEERS"?

Overseers and bishops were the same persons. The same word, translated in the text "overseers," is translated in Phil. 1:1, *bishops*. The same is done elsewhere in the epistles. Elders and overseers were the same kind of officers, called by different names, as appears from the passage under consideration as the text. The persons who are called elders in the 17th verse, are denominated overseers in the 28th verse. That an elder and a bishop, in the New-Testament, signify the same personage, is also manifest from the Epistle to Titus, 1:5,7. The apostle giving direction to "ordain elders," describes the qualifications of the *same* persons, by saying "a bishop must be blameless," &c. It farther appears from the duty of bishops being also assigned to elders. "The elders which are among you I exhort. Feed the flock of God that is among you, *taking the oversight thereof.*" 1 Peter 5:12. They are, then, used convertibly in the sacred volume.

The word translated, usually, elders, is also properly rendered presbytery. (1 Tim. 4:14.) So that elders, overseers, bishops, presbytery, *all refer to the same class of persons.* An elder, or presbyter, signifies, literally, an aged person. Though in the Jewish church

the name corresponded generally to the fact, it does not seem that in the time of the apostles, elders were always persons advanced in life. Elders are distinguished into two classes by the apostle Paul, in his first epistle to Timothy 5:17. "Let the *elders that rule well* be accounted worthy of double honor; especially, *they who labor in the word and doctrine.*" An elder, that labored "in the word and in doctrine," bore, sometimes, the extraordinary office of an apostle. Peter, in his first epistle, 5:1, says, "The elders which are among you, I exhort, who am *also an elder.*" Also, 1 John 1:1. 2 John 1:1. Others mentioned in the New-Testament were public laborers in the word, and ruled in the church, but were not inspired apostles. Some such joined in the ordination of Paul and Barnabas, and are spoken of (Acts 13:1) as "teachers."

The other class of elders, we believe, are described (1 Cor. 12:28,) as "governments," and by the apostle Peter, as the "elders that rule," because that was the leading feature of their office. And the exhortation of the apostle, (Rom. 12:8,) "he that ruleth, with diligence," was intended especially for them. They are elsewhere spoken of in common with the teaching elders. This we believe to have been the fact in regard to those who came at Paul's request from Ephesus to Miletus, and to whom he gave the instruction of the text. They were all equally charged with the duty of overseeing the flock, and of causing it to be fed; which is entirely consistent with the idea of only one or more attempting in a public manner to teach or preach. The duties which the apostle enjoined on them will be considered incumbent, of course, on all who bear the like office in every age of the church. To those, then, who have been called, by a saving influence on their hearts, giving them a desire and qualification to do good, and to glorify God as ruling elders; and who have been called to that office by the voice of the church, we will apply the advice of the apostle, by considering,

II. THE DUTIES OF RULING ELDERS.

1. They are to rule in the church of God. According to the form of government of the Presbyterian Church, "ruling elders are properly the representatives of the people, chosen by them for the purpose of exercising government and discipline, in conjunction with pastors or ministers." For this, and for other purposes, they are to be "overscers." They are included in the references to rulers, Heb. 13:17. 1 Thes. 5:12,13. They are to take their seats in judicatories of the church as the elders spoken of Acts 15:4,6, that they may consult and carry out the will of Christ. They are to decide who are worthy to be church members, and on cases of alleged offence according to the statutes of Him who is Head over all things to the church." They are never to contravene his laws by legislation. They are, in their individual capacities, to oversee those admitted to the privileges of the church, that they do not depart from the truth and duty; to "admonish" alone, if the offence is of a private nature, to report to the whole

representatives of the church, those, who prove intractable. To perform these duties they must truly be overseers, which implies that they must be doers.

2. The ruling elder is to "*feed the church of God.*" He is to perform the office of a shepherd towards it, as the word signifies.

Besides being subject to the ordinary duties, binding on all ordinary christians; to "exhort one another daily;" to "save others, pulling them out of the fire;" to labor to be the instrument of converting the "sinner from the error of his ways;" he is bound, from his office, to give private instruction, and to procure, if possible, public instruction. To feed the flock, he must visit the members, (or he cannot know their wants,)—exhort them, pray with them, especially the sick, James 5:14. He has not the faith of miracles—they have ceased—therefore he need not anoint the sick with oil, as was formerly done.

3. He must take heed to *all* the flock. He must comfort the aged and "feeble minded;" watch over and guard the youth,—the lambs of the flock; instruct them in Sabbath schools, and teach them the catechisms. He is to be faithful to the rich; not to pass by the poor, "preferring one before another;" to enlighten the ignorant of every age and color, taking heed to *all* over which the Holy Ghost hath made him an overseer. If this be done extensively by the teaching elder, who is to give himself "wholly" to the work of the ministry, there will be the less for the ruling elder to do. If there be no such one, then he and his associates should devote themselves more particularly to these duties,—especially to guiding the *anxious* and inquiring.

4. An elder is to *take heed to himself.* "Take heed to yourselves." The particulars in himself, to which the elder should take heed, are sufficiently enumerated by the apostle in his epistle to Titus from the 6th to the 9th verse inclusive, which see. But here, I may be met with the objection, that this portion of sacred writ was intended for teaching elders, *exclusively.* It has already been shown that the term bishop, is synonymous with the *generic*, or general term, elder. As the apostle has not applied it to the species who "labor in the word and doctrine," so no other one has a right to do so, any more than he ought to confine it to ruling elders. And according to a rule of interpretation, the passage should have the most extended application, unless circumscribed by the Holy Ghost. But it may be said, that the elders which Titus was to ordain were to be, like himself, teaching elders, because it is said in the 5th verse, "ordain elders in every city," as I *had appointed thee.* It should be known, however, that the word rendered ordain, in the first of these members of the sentence, is altogether a different word from that translated "appointed" in the last clause. The primary meaning of the latter is, *to command*, and the translation, according to its strict meaning, would be ordain elders in every city, as I *commanded* thee. If so, the apostle did not refer to his manner of ordination of Titus; but he was only repeating a former direction.

Moreover, the Greeks used the original word, translated *city*, when speaking of a village also; and here "it is applied to both." He

might find villages where there was a sufficient number to constitute a church, with ruling elders and a teaching elder, but he would scarcely ordain a plurality of laborers "in word and doctrine" in a small church. That *this* portion of the epistle was not intended to apply exclusively to teaching elders, seems evident, from the fact that the apostle says nothing about the bishop being "apt to teach," as he does in the passage somewhat similar in the 3d chapter of 1st Timothy.

He is to "hold fast the word as he *hath been taught*," that he might do that which it was lawful for a ruling elder to do, "exhort and convince the gainsayers." (Tit. 1:9.) An elder should take heed to acquire food in order to feed the flock. He has the bible, other books and sources of instruction, and the promise of the Spirit, so that if he be ignorant, he is inexcusable. Seek the wisdom promised, James 1:5.

He must take heed to be "holy," Tit. 1:8—seek to "grow in grace." Without piety, he will be worse than useless. If he have it buried in the rubbish of this world, if it is in a declining state, he will neither have a *heart* for his duties, nor perform them to the advantage of others, nor to the honor of God. He should be "sober," or prudent, as the word in the original more strictly means. Prudent in speech—in retaining what is not necessary to be told—in all judicial measures—in all his conduct. That he may know how and when prudently to encourage, commence, or carry on *process* against supposed offenders in the church, he should carefully study our "BOOK OF DISCIPLINE." His prudence should not be that *spurious* kind, which is ever and anon pleading, it is *not prudent*, when the plainest duties are to be performed; which is continually saying, "there is a lion in the way." This, dear brethren, is the offspring of sloth and cowardice, not of genuine, fervent piety.

An elder or bishop should take heed to be "blameless." He cannot always be exempt from the slanders of the wicked, who "say all manner of evil—falsely;" but he must not be *really* wanting in integrity of speech, in the fulfilment of promises (if possible,) in honest dealings. He must be "just," (Tit. 1:8,) or there will be no confidence in him "as the steward of God."

"He must have a good report of them which are without, lest he fall into reproach." If he think to attain it of the wicked by neglect of duty, or by conniving at sin, he will surely secure their contempt and reproach; for though they may be gratified with his unfaithfulness, they will be the *first* to speak of it.

An elder must take heed to be "vigilant" in seeking for opportunities to do good; for elders, or overseers, "watch for souls, as they who must give account." Heb. 13:17.

An elder must not be "self-willed." He must not mistake obstinacy for independence of mind; nor be self-conceited.

He must not be "soon angry." If he cannot govern himself; how can he govern "the church of God?" He should be soon reconciled; "let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

He must be of "good behavior." Not vain, or given to "filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient."

Eph. 5:4. Not a "brawler," but grave in conversation; not morose.

He must not be "given to wine." The pure juice of the grape may be used for the "stomach's sake," and for his "often infirmities," if he be diseased, or on marriage, or "communion" occasions; but he is not to be given to it, much less to "strong drink." He should be "temperate" "in all (lawful and expedient) things."

He must be no "striker," except in defence of life, and not then if he is about to suffer for the kingdom of heaven's sake. Matt. 5:39. Luke 9:24.

Not given to "filthy lucre." He is not to neglect his duties to attain it, nor make his office subserve avaricious purposes, nor given to attain it by unjust methods, or an unchristian business. He should not let his love for it keep him from sustaining the important benevolent societies for extending the Redeemer's kingdom, nor cause him to approve misrepresentations of them.

He must be "patient" with the wandering, refractory part of the flock, of which he is a bishop, like the great "Shepherd and Bishop of souls."

He must take heed that he be "a lover of hospitality." "Entertain strangers,"—especially them who are of "the household of faith." He should have a public spirit, ready to "do good unto all men," according "as God hath prospered him."

He should take heed to be a "lover of good men," of every denomination, and of every age, and of every condition. As such, he should defend them when assailed unjustly by the *common enemy*. He must not dislike, through envy, his brethren of the eldership because of superior attainments or gifts, nor refuse to sustain the teaching elder in the discharge of his duty.

From this subject I remark,

1. That the New-Testament affords no countenance, from the import of the official appellations, for the distinction between superior or diocesan bishops, and ordinary elders, who "labor in the word and in doctrine."

2. How wise is the arrangement of the Head of the Church! He has left some particulars of church order, to be adapted by her uninspired rulers to the circumstances in which she is placed; yet, he has designated such officers and made such *general* regulations as would promote her increased energy and glory, if they were properly sustained.

3. If the preceding description of what should be the character and qualifications of a ruling elder, and of what are his duties, be correct, how important is his office, and what a weight of responsibility rests upon him! And yet how lamentably deficient are many who bear the office!

4. Lastly: It may be evident that the duties of the office of ruling elder are not sufficiently fulfilled, when he aids in receiving and rejecting candidates for full communion in the church, when he helps to distribute the elements in the Lord's Supper, when he occasionally consults with the other members of the session, and when he takes his seat in other church courts.