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The American Baptist Historical Society
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THE FUTURE AND IMPORTANCE
OF
FAMILY and CLOSET RELIGION,
CONSIDERED IN A
CIRCULAR LETTER

FROM THE
BAPTIST MINISTERS and MESSENGERS,
Assembled at LEICESTER, May 29, 30, and 31, 1787.

Maintaining the important Doctrines of three equal Persons in the Godhead; eternal and personal Election; original Sin; particular Redemption; free Justification by the imputed Righteousness of Christ; efficacious Grace in Regeneration; the final Perseverance of the Saints; and the Independency, or congregational Order of the Churches of Christ inviolably.

To the several Churches they represent, or have received Letters from, meeting at Codnor, Sutton-Ashfield, Nottingham, Sheephead, Leicester, Sutton-in-the-Elms, Arnby, Clifton, Oakham, Gretton, Spalding, Soham, Kettering, Waldgrave, Moulton, Guilsborough, Northampton, Road, Carlton, Olney, Thorn, and St. Alban's.

Grace be unto you, and Peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear brethren!

WITH gratitude to our indulgent God, we inform you of our being favoured with another annual interview, and with such gracious tokens of his presence as have rendered the season in some degree pleasing and profitable. The letters from the churches were attended to with such sensations as the different subjects were calculated to promote. While we mourn over the moral defects particularly in some, we are very thankful that encouraging accounts were transmitted to us from most of the churches. The means of grace are in general well attended, and in various places evidently blessed. Several churches which were destitute, are now happily provided with ministers and pastors. The blessing of peace is enjoyed in our respective congregations as extensively as we ever remember it to have been. And in the doctrines of rich grace and the interest of true holiness, there appears a general and cordial union.

For the bestowment, continuance and increase of such blessings, we trust you will unite with us in prayer and praise. Consider, dear brethren, that genuine dependence on the Lord is inseparably connected with a close conscientious attendance upon him. It is for the promoting of your faith and joy, which are so intimately connected with a diligent waiting upon God, in all the means of his appointment, that we once more crave your most serious attention to our united epistle.

You have been addressed for a series of years with great plainness of speech, on many precious and important branches of religion. These letters have been the result of our joint concern to promote in you an universal

universal conformity to the whole will of God; and knowing the tendency of divine truth in the hands of the Holy Spirit to produce such conformity, we have attempted in our annual letters to illustrate, confirm and improve, several of the sacred truths of the gospel. In pursuance of the same end, we shall this year lay before you *the nature and importance of family and closet religion.* Last year we addressed you upon the authority and sanctification of the Lord's day, which related chiefly to public worship; this year we would turn your attention to that which is more private, but of equal importance.

Religion ought to be the main business of our lives; and religion in the family and the closet makes a considerable part of the christian life. It is here, if any where, that the true christian will be distinguished from others. While many content themselves with such public exercises as fall under the eye of the multitude, the language of his heart is, *As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

We are not without painful apprehensions that these duties are not so generally and uniformly regarded as they ought. Many wholly despise and totally neglect them, as accounting them unfashionable and puritanical; and others who more particularly profess to be the followers of Christ, though they may not lay them wholly aside, yet, we are afraid, give them but a very negligent and superficial attendance. These things wear a melancholy aspect, and must give pain to every pious heart. But, brethren, we hope better things of you, though we thus speak; yet without hope you will allow us to exercise a godly jealousy over you. To say the least, you find your temptations, difficulties, and discouragements in the exercise of these duties; a word of caution, direction and encouragement, therefore, cannot be unseasonable.

FAMILY RELIGION includes not merely a single act of devotion, but extends to the several duties which devolve upon us as the heads of such collective bodies. Its exercises might perhaps be rendered more pleasureable and advantageous by considering its different branches, and so managing our affairs as to give each branch its proper place. Catechizing and privately instructing at seasonable opportunities, we presume, would be but fulfilling the trust we owe to our domestics. Ignorance, prejudice and pride, are the attendants of human nature; all concur to render instruction necessary. Inform them of their condition as fallen creatures, the impossibility of enjoying God in such circumstances; with the necessity of a divine change in heart and life: instruct them also in the riches and freeness of the grace of Christ, and his sufficiency and suitability to persons in their circumstances!

Reading some part of the holy scriptures should likewise be an ordinary part of our family worship. We wish you, brethren, not only to search the scriptures daily for yourselves, but to read them, or cause them to be read in your families; and that constantly and carefully. There is no instruction like that which is derived from the word of God. It was of old enjoined Israel, saying, *Ye shall lay up these my words in your heart, and in your soul;—and ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.* It is recorded to the honour, it should seem, of Eunice the mother of Timothy, that *from a child he had known the holy scriptures.**

At proper seasons it might assist our devotion, and keep up a greater

variety

* Deut. xi. 18, 19. 2 Tim. iii. 15.

variety in our worship, to *sing* a few verses of a psalm or hymn. Such a practice, where it may comport with family circumstances, and can be conducted with order and regularity, may be of an enlivening tendency; but where it is otherwise, it is better omitted, as it would add neither solemnity nor sweetness to our worship. †

At all events attend to family *prayer*; let not this be omitted on any avoidable account whatever. Let it be regular and constant; and this, we apprehend, it cannot be, unless it be *daily*. Christ taught his disciples to pray for spiritual blessings as often as they prayed for their *daily* bread. † On many accounts it is suitable to begin and end the day with prayer; in the morning to acknowledge God's watchful care through the night, to intreat his presence and blessing through the ensuing day; and at evening to adore him for the bounties of the past day, to bewail our imperfections, plead his divine promises, and commit all our concerns into his hands. Prayer is the key, which in the morning opens to us the treasures of God's mercy, and in the evening shuts us up, as it were, under his protection and safeguard.

It is difficult to give particular directions respecting the most proper mode of conducting this service. Your circumstances and occupations are so various, that perhaps no determinate rule could be given to which all families could accede. We can only say, therefore, in general, brethren, that such a season should be chosen as is least liable to interruption; and when all, or most of your domestics can attend. Beware especially of putting off the service too long, lest the world engross those thoughts that should be otherwise employed. If the mind is once keenly set on worldly concerns, it will exceedingly damp and deaden the heart to holy duties. As earth cast upon the fire puts it out; so the world, when it spreads over the affections, must strangely damp that holy flame that should ascend up to heaven in our sacrifices. You know, brethren, it is not easy to rise under a heavy load; nor to summon the soul in a moment from the world, to attend upon God with becoming solemnity and spirituality. God requires, and is worthy of the first-fruits of our time, attention, and affections. Never let us offer him the lame and the blind in our sacrifices; but go when we can wait upon him with most freedom of spirit.

At evening as well as morning prayer, late services should as much as possible be avoided. How unfit are we for the worship of God when our animal frame is nearly exhausted, and our senses in a sort locked up; with what pleasure can we reflect upon those services in which the bodies of at least some in the family, even while prostrate before the Lord, have been overcome with drowsiness!

If you read a part of God's word, or sing, as well as pray in your families, care should be taken that you do not run to an inconvenient length. We apprehend that some good people have protracted their prayers far beyond the bounds of prudence; as they not only weary and disgust many of their domestics, and so render the service irksome; but likewise go beyond the fervour of their own affections. Hence it is that a disagreeable languor, and unpleasing tautology are generally the attendants of such services. We wish you, brethren, to be more particular
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† We would here recommend a *Selection of Hymns* lately published by our brother Rippon of London, which is not designed to set aside the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts, which are so generally used and so justly esteemed in our churches; but to serve as an *Appendix* to them, on which account none of his psalms and hymns are included in this selection, but a great variety of the best hymns from a number of other authors, with many originals never before published. † Matt. vi. 9--13.

with respect to the solemnity and spirituality of your devotions, than the length to which they shall be extended.

Consider yourselves as prophets and priests in your respective families : — As prophets, give them instruction, rebuke, exhort, admonish ; be not indifferent to immoralities in servants, for if let alone, they may bring your children to ruin. Read the 101st psalm upon this subject ; it is an excellent psalm upon family government. — As priests, collect the offerings, the guilt, the miseries, the necessities of your families, and present them before the Lord. When you approach the throne of grace, think with holy Job, *It may be, that my sons, or servants have sinned against the Lord*—It may be some of them never pray for themselves. Make those cases your own which once were your own ! While you have a God to go to, say with Samuel, *God forbid that I should sin against the Lord, in ceasing to pray for you !*—While you are thus presenting the offerings of your families, take encouragement from the many great and precious promises, the purport of all which, is, that God *never said to the seed of Jacob, seek ye my face in vain.* Keep your eye also upon the blood of sprinkling ; never forget your great high-priest, through whose intercession all your prayers are accepted, and all Jehovah's promises fulfilled.

While we recommend a diligent, regular, and constant attention to the religion of the family, we wish you, brethren, not to forget that of the closet. By closet religion is intended those transactions which take place between God and our own souls in private. To this exercise our Lord counsels his disciples, saying, *Enter thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.** If this is neglected, our souls can never prosper ; and surely we would not wish to watch over our families, as over the vineyard of others, and at the same time neglect our own.

The great end of closet devotion is the exercise of grace in one's own soul, to which end it seems better adapted than the more public devotions of the family. *There* we are under a kind of necessity to seek out acceptable words, and to exercise our gifts, seeing what is done is not only for our own profit, but as well for the edification of others ; but *here* we may express our desires even in *groans which cannot be uttered.* Provided that our spirits are but reverent, it matters not though the connexion of words be broken and incoherent. Yes, here we may pray, and pause, reflect and pray again. There are various personal concerns which we cannot express with freedom before any creature ; *bitternesses* which our *own hearts only know*, and must know ; but here we may pour out our whole soul ! We may confess our brutish ignorance, without fear of being upbraided ; bewail our most secret sins without danger of being exposed ; in a word, we may carry our burdens, whatever they be, and cast them upon the Lord, and find rest to our souls.

Let us, in the next place, point out to you, dear brethren, the *importance* of the duties, the nature and manner of conducting which we have attempted to explain. Family religion is both ancient and honourable ; and is a duty incumbent upon all heads of families, (except such as labour under natural inability) and that *from the very nature of things.* We might challenge the most irreverent and sneering deist to prove any thing irrational or unworthy of a man in any of these sacred devotions. Yea, he must not only take leave of christianity, but of rationality and common sense ere he can vindicate himself in the neglect of them. He may affect

* Matt. vi. 6.

to laugh at such exercises as the attendants of fanaticism, the effects of superstitious zeal, or low prejudices, or as making an ostentatious and needless parade; but all this is against his own conscience, and merely for the purpose of keeping himself in countenance in iniquity. Let him only put off the buffoon and assume the man, and one might ask him a few such questions as the following;—What can be more becoming a *dependent state* than to pay our united homage to the author of our being, and the supreme governor of the world? Can any thing more significantly bespeak an *ingenuous temper*, or administer a greater satisfaction to our most refined feelings, than the exercises of penitential devotion? Can there be a more *sublime pleasure*, or a more *advantageous employ*, than to contemplate the source of all excellencies, and unbosom our souls before him who feels for us, and says, *Cast thy burden upon me?* Are no acknowledgements due to the divine Being from us as creatures? Have we no farther need of his protecting care; no more occasion for the blessings of his goodness?

Persons of the above description, whenever they think proper to introduce the divine Being into their discourse, love to speak of him merely as *the Father of his creatures*. We might ask then, is it unworthy of the character of children to present themselves before a parent, to express their wants and commit themselves to his protection? yea, and if they have offended him, is it a mean thing to acknowledge that offence, and implore forgiveness? rather, is it not a mean thing, and the mark of a vagabond spirit, when we have offended God, to fly from him, and try to forget our wretchedness by wallowing in the mire of sensual and sordid gratifications? King David, upon his dying bed, gave this charge to his son Solomon, *I go the way of all the earth;—SHEW THYSELF A MAN;—keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments!**

That avowed libertines should neglect these duties, however, is no wonder; communion with God would not suit or consist with their course of life; but that any who profess to fear God, and to expect salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ, should live in such neglect, is strange indeed. It seems there have been characters in the world who have made great profession of religion, have given constant attendance at the public worship of God, and have appeared to entertain no doubts whatever of the safety of their own state, who nevertheless have lived in the habitual omission of these duties; and that under a pretence that they lead to *pharisaical pride*. We hope, dear brethren, that such notions and such practices are far from you! It must be very difficult to account for such persons being full of love to God, and yet to have none for the souls of their children and dependants; or for their great regard to the gospel while they are enemies to the law, which enjoins us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Besides, who most resembles the proud pharisee; he whose religion is merely in public, where he is *seen of men*, or he who carries his religion home to his family, and his closet? characters of the above description are not so much to be reasoned with, as rebuked and shunned, that they may be ashamed.

The importance of family and secret religion appears in various points of light; as it refers to *God, ourselves or others*. As it refers to God, if ever we glorify his name to any purpose, it must be in domestic life. Spectators will judge of our religion, not so much by what we say abroad as by what we do at home. Even our public conduct will have but little tendency to glorify God, if contradicted by private irregularity. Wife

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* 1 Kings ii. 2, 3.

men generally make this observation, If you would know a man's true character, say they, see what he is in secret, in domestic life, when the eye of the world is not upon him.

Farther, its importance appears as it refers to *ourselves*. There is not only a close connexion between one duty and another, but as well between one blessing and another. The public worship of God can never be properly enjoyed as a privilege, any more than performed as a duty, but in conjunction with family religion; and family religion can never be carried on to any good purpose, without a close walking with God in private. The exercises of the closet, in a particular manner, are subservient to our souls prosperity. It is here, if at all, that we carry on a kind of commerce with heaven; that we deal with Christ for *gold tried in the fire, that we may be rich, for white raiment that we may be clothed, and for eye-salve that we may see*. If this commerce fail, we shall indeed be *poor, and wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked!** It was before observed, that there are a variety of personal concerns which we cannot express before any creature; if then we omit closet exercises, those concerns must, of course, come to an ill issue. If, for instance, we have contracted guilt in our consciences, this will wear out of mind by degrees, instead of being lamented before God, and brought to the Saviour's cross; and if so, the matter is not yet done with; God has yet a controversy with us:—Or if any particular trouble lies upon us, it will wear off in time; but it will leave us worse than it found us. Troubles are fitly called *temptations*, they tend to discover either our graces or corruptions; but we have no reason to expect a discovery of the former, except, like Hezekiah, we *spread them before the Lord*.

As the religion of the closet profits our souls, and fits us for the duties of the family, so that of the family fits us for the more public worship of God in the church. The one is a sort of preparative for the other. It is that to our spirits which rain is to the ground for the reception of the seed. The repetition of it also, on our return, tends to preserve a favor in our spirits of what we have been hearing. It is thus, that, as the good ground, we *receive the seed of the word, and bring forth fruit with patience*.

Farther, The duties of which we have been speaking affect not only ourselves, but *others*. Family religion is, generally speaking, a blessing to those who are instructed by it, and to society at large. Children are hereby taught to reverence religion; and being taught the good and the right way, are not so readily drawn aside into pernicious errors, and cannot, at so easy a rate, indulge themselves in gross immoralities. These, to say the least, are the effects of a godly education. On these accounts, the community at large have a claim upon parents. A family is the first society, and a seminary to all the rest. The whole commonwealth is made up of single persons in divers relations. Towns, congregations, cities and countries, are all made up out of several families. To principle and instruct them, therefore, is the way to make good magistrates, good subjects, good husbands, good wives, good masters, good servants, and good neighbours. Loyalty to our king, and love to our country, cannot be better manifested than by a close attention to family government. On this ground, and nothing short of it, we may hope for their future respectability.

But we need not bound our expectations here; how many thousands have received impressions from their education which have never left them till they have issued in real conversion. Let us aim not merely at their civilization, but at their salvation. Real piety is frequently known to

* Rev. iii. 17, 18.

continue in a long succession in families; and it is a well-known fact, that religious families are nurseries for the church. Though no one is born again of blood, any more than of *the will of man*; and though the children of the godly are intitled to no peculiar privilege that we know of on account of their descent; yet they enjoy a religious education: and why may we not suppose that the number of the truly godly from such families, exceeding those of others, is owing to the blessing with which God is pleased to crown the prayers and instructions of the parents? It is thus that we account for a fact very nearly resembling it. We usually see in those towns and villages where the means of grace are supported, many more souls converted to God, than in those where it is otherwise; but do we thence conclude that those favoured places must be intitled to some peculiar privileges? rather, do we not impute it to God's graciously blessing the means of his own appointment? If God puts more honour upon one family than others, it is usually, though not always, upon such who are most eminent in these duties. Of Abraham, who was so peculiarly favoured, and of whom so much is said in respect of his descendants, it is witnessed, *I know him that he will command his children, and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord.**

Though public worship should be at all events attended to; yet during the tender age of childhood, perhaps it is not so much from public as from private instruction that we are to hope for our children's conversion. The public ministry of the word is seldom at that period of life so adapted to their capacities as instructions which are given them on purpose.—Or, suppose the instructions, warnings, and counsels of the pulpit, should be of use to them, still they need to be seconded by others in private. Let us intreat you, brethren, as you value the true interest of the dearest parts of yourselves, help us in this good work! When death makes breaches in the churches, to your families we look, in hope of seeing the vacancies supplied! Permit us to repeat the thought, consider your families as the churches nurseries; and see that the young plantations are not neglected!

Only view your labours as succeeded of God for good; think what joy it must afford to have children and servants born again in your house! With what satisfaction will you leave the world, when you can leave behind you successors that know and fear the Lord; successors, who like Solomon to David, shall enter into your designs, follow your good example, and perhaps far exceed you in piety and usefulness!

Finally, brethren, hearken to *the voice of God!* Pray without ceasing—praying always, with ALL PRAYER—Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it—Bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord—I will pour out my wrath upon the heathen, upon the families that call not upon my name—Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands; happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house; thy children like olive plants round about thy table. Behold thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord. The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion, and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel!

Dearly beloved brethren, farewell. The God of love and peace be with you.

Signed in behalf of the association, by

ROBERT HALL, Moderator.

* Gen. xviii. 19.

B R E V I A T E S.

Tuesday evening we met at the usual hour. Brother Hall, of Arnby, was chosen moderator. After singing and prayer, the letters from the churches were read, minutes taken of their contents, and the opportunity concluded in prayer.

Wednesday morning, between six and seven, met for prayer—About ten the public meeting began, with singing and prayer as usual; after which a short account was given of the nature and design of the association—Brother Mills, of Sheephead, then preached from 2 Thes. iii. 5. *And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.* Brother Fletcher prayed, and brother Gill, of St. Alban's, preached from 2 Tim. ii. 19. *Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his: and let every one that nameth the name of Christ, depart from iniquity.* Brother Sutcliff, of Olney, concluded in prayer.—At six in the evening met again. Brother Fawkner, of Thorn, prayed, and brother Ryland, jun. preached from Gal. iii. 21. *Is the law then against the promise of God? God forbid. For if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law.* Brother Spencer concluded in prayer.

Thursday morning we met again for prayer, and communicating our experience as ministers, settling the business of the association fund, with some other things. The substance of the letter, drawn up by brother Hopper, was presented, and ordered to be printed. About Twelve the association was concluded in prayer by the moderator.

State of the churches since the last association.

Added	{	Upon a profession of faith	—	—	79
		By letters of recommendation	—	—	18
		Restored after exclusion	—	—	2
					—99
Diminished	{	By death	—	—	31
		By exclusion	—	—	5
		By dismission to other churches*			19
					—55
		Increase	—	—	44

* Of these, ten were embedded at Gretton, and are all included in the former article of "Added by letter, &c."

Letters were received from the churches at Moulton, and Gretton, in Northamptonshire, and Thorn, in Bedfordshire, requesting admission into the association, which was cheerfully granted.

Agreed, 1. That the thanks of this association be given to the Rev. Dr. Stennet, for his judicious sermons on the parable of the sower.

2. That as we are informed of an intended application to parliament for an abolition of the slave trade, we will use all lawful means for the promoting of so just and humane a design.

3. That our brother Ryland, jun. be requested to print his sermon delivered on Wednesday evening.

4. That the monthly prayer-meetings, for the revival of religion, be continued.

The next association to be at Kettering, on Wednesday, May 28th, 1788, being a fortnight after Whitsuntide. Brother Ryland and brother Sutcliff to preach; in case of failure, brother Hall.—Put up at the White-Hart.

F I N I S.