An Address Delivered at the Laying of the Corner-Stone of Immanuel Church, La Grange, Tennessee, 1840

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AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

LAYING OF THE CORNER-STONE

OF

IMMANUEL CHURCH, LA GRANGE.

BY

The Rev. PHILIP W. ALSTON,
Deacon, in charge of Calvary Church, Memphis.

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ADDRESS.

Brethren and Friends:—If, among social enterprises, there be any which we can hope to be unembarrassed by divisions of social sentiment, any so fortunate as to kindle universal sympathy, and command unanimous applause,—surely it must be that whose auspicious commencement we have assembled to behold and signalize. If it be the part of philanthropy and patriotism, to aid and to rejoice in the preparation of means for the intellectual culture of our people, and even in physical undertakings which tend to the promotion of national prosperity,—how much more zealous should be the effort, how much more lively the congratulation, for a work like this, wrought in humble subservience of the vast design of Infinite Wisdom and Benevolence, to purify the hearts of mankind,—to rescue them from moral curse and bondage, and exalt them to an immortality of happiness!

In a land such as ours, and in a portion of that immense territory where social organization is yet in a nascent state, incomplete, and even in a degree unsettled, a spectacle like this is clothed with peculiar interest. It is an occasion to revolve the momentous truth, that we, the Republicans of this New World, have chosen to rely, for the establishment and support of Christian institutions, on the success of a mighty experiment. Among us, Religion is solely and emphatically a concern of the people. For its maintenance, its extension, its perpetuation, it is dependent on the individual, not as a political association, but simply as a multitude of souls. We have given it no guarantee, save individual sense of duty. We have assigned to it no resources, save the voluntary exertions and offerings of individual zeal. In this disposition of the national responsibility for the maintenance of Christianity, we have disregarded the opinion and the practice of all the world besides,—and the eyes of the men of all Christian lands and creeds are turned upon us, with distrust and evil foreboding of what they naturally deem a hazardous and startling experiment. We, on the contrary, are accustomed to speak of its results fearlessly and complacently, both as Christians and citizens. We claim to have abstract propriety and primitive usage on our side. We affirm truly, that the connexion of Religion with Government, resembles the torture of Mezentius,—a living body chained to the foul embrace of a corrupting carcass. We reason well, that Christianity is not a parasite which must be trained to cling to political institutions, and clasp them in its tendrils, in order to find support:—It is rather the tree beneath whose protecting umbrage human civilization can alone find shelter; and it should therefore be left in its natural freedom, its roots quietly suffered to feed for the soil which feeds them best, and its branches to stretch out their arms toward the quarter which proves most congenial, untrammled by a care which must produce distortion, and a protection which must operate as constraint.

And while we ACT, my friends, in the spirit of such sentiments, we may speak them without charge of inconsistency, or openness to contradiction. For action is the sure condition of triumphant success for our experiment: and if it proves abortive, the only cause must be our sad delinquency. As long as we exhibit a proper sense of this highest and most sacred of all the civic responsibilities of American freemen; as long as we show to the world that the great object from which we withheld the
support of laws, may rest securely on our consciences; and that the trust which we have declined as a nation, we have embraced as men, as citizens, as souls: so long may we consistently boast the sentiments in which this is the test of our sincerity. For our voluntary system, if adequately and cheerfully sustained, is not only free from the peculiar and necessary evils of established religion, but fraught with precious advantages of its own. If it fails, the failure will be no fault of the pleasing theory.—It will be chargeable only to the delinquent spirit which suffers the failure. It will be our national sin; and it will bring down a national retribution. For in our country peculiarly—and especially in their offense, there is a fixed and immediate relation of cause and effect between national sin, and its appropriate curse. A century hence, the result of this experiment will be the singular glory and happiness of these States, or it will be their peculiar misery and lamentable disgrace. And on what is the momentous alternative suspended! On nothing, my friends, but individual sense of duty, individual liberty, individual exertion. There is no immediate body, or class, or association, to intercept or concentrate the obligation. It is equally diffused through the social mass, and affects directly each individual element. For the maintenance of gospel institutions, every man here present is directly and personally responsible, to his God, and to his country; and there rests nowhere any responsibility more direct or more imperative than his own. There is no representative agency to which this department of the common weal has been entrusted, and upon which the accountability may be shifted. It is a matter in which every citizen must attend to his own business; must make provision for his own personal needs, and perform his own public duties. Observe, it is not Christians alone who are thus responsible; a common, but very absurd mistake. Men age not exempt, because they do not profess to be religious. There is an obligation on every soul to make such a profession, and to sustain it; and therefore there is an obligation on every soul to all the duties which such a profession involves: for men cannot be released from one duty by the neglect of another. A voluntary system it is, just as obedience to the laws of God and the dictates of conscience is voluntary; voluntary, inasmuch as the impulse proceeds from moral accountability, and not from the compulsion of human laws; voluntary, inasmuch as men may, if they will, withhold their co-operation: but not voluntary in any sense which would imply that men can, if they would, disown the duty, and shake off the obligation.

This is a subject, my friends, on which it behooves us to think seriously, and to speak freely with each other: for the circumstances which environ us, invest it with a peculiar importance. Our social responsibilities here extend beyond the mere preservation and extension of public benefits. We have to open and construct permanently the sources of such benefits. We have a loose elements, detached from various and remote communities, and gathering into new social relations in this wilderness, whither we have come to subdue and to possess it. We are laying the corner-stone of the social edifice; it is our part to gather the materials, and prepare the cement, and rear the walls and roofs: we are determining whether peace and probity, piety and intelligence, shall fix therein their benign abode, or crime and ignorance, impurity and irreligion, riot uncontrolled, in communities where laws are without authority, and virtue without respect. We shall be the workers of happiness or of misery in the generations which follow after us: we are now purchasing for ourselves their gratitude or their malediction; and the Great Disposer of moral allotments will require at our hands the immense capabilities for good or evil, with which his Providence has entrusted us. Yet more; you livend the kind shadow of civil institutions, which can flourish only in the soil of public virtue. It is a verity of which you cannot too often be reminded, that “for the execution of civil enactments, for obedience to the constituted authorities, and for the peace and happiness of society, we must look to the preservation of a sound moral sentiment.” We make it our boast, that our social good is not dependent on the circumstances or character of an individual; from such a cause we have no anxieties respecting the happiness of our families, and our country. And yet many of us will live to see the sceptre of our social condition transferred, and the destinies of this nation—civil and religious, intellectual and moral, public and individual—pass into the hands of the little beings whose minds are now occupied with the toys of childhood. Now the successors of a sovereign people may be as degenerate in comparison, as the successor of a sovereign monarch. Nay, the voice of history proclaims the impressive lesson, that the glories of former republics have been evanescent, that their energies have become effete more suddenly and sadly than the vigor of some hereditary dynasties. They seem to resemble those vegetable species which bloom more magnificently and bear a richer fruiteage, but arrive at an earlier decrepitude. They flourish as long as the people possess a clear moral vision to discern their own best interests, with sound and disciplined moral energies to maintain them. In the hour when these safeguards are sacrificed, ours must follow the old republics in their fond descent to misery and ruin,—scourged by those evils of the same origin, and yet more intolerable, which expose the quiet walks of private life to the irruptions of violence and pollution.

And how shall the vital principle of your social institutions be preserved pure and vigorous? Would you remind us that the schoolmaster is abroad, and the printing press busy, and repeat the axiom more often quoted than understood, that “Knowledge is Power”? Think you that to diffuse intelligence is in other words, or by necessary consequences, to promote morals and that the conceptions of men may be enlightened and intemperately by merely storing their minds? We know that this is the favorite maxim of our age and country. We encounter it everywhere. We hear it almost daily in conversation, and see it in the public prints; it is proclaimed in popular addresses, and lurks even in legislative enactments. And yet, my friends, it is a maxim false in theory, and fatal in experiment. Knowledge has genuine worth ample sufficient to attract pursuit, and afford matter for rational panegyric, without clothing it with pretensions which are both absurd and dangerous. It is Power,—but it is not Motive. It is power, inasmuch as it inspires confidence, commands influence, and supplies resources; but all for purposes which are already suggested and fixed by a more subtle faculty. It is an instrument, whose results derive their moral character from the moral agency which wields it: as that agency is for good or evil, Knowledge is used or abused, supports or ruins, purifies or depraves. That is, the moral influence of Intelligence is produced by that which it is said to create,—is dependent on the very circumstance of which it is said to be decisor. Individual instances are but two numerous, in which Intelligence and Vice instead of antagonizing, are allied, to make the compound of character more noxious and loathsome. And how often do we see the avenue between the Understanding and the Cou-
science closed,—voluntarily and carefully closed, that while Knowledge illuminates one chamber, Sin, unblushing and unopposed, may riot in the other! Now what is true of individuals, is true of the mass. For a people without refinement the range of physical and mental enjoyments must be barren and contracted; but the purity of morals, the restraints of law, and that fireside happiness which after all is the most precious of social treasures, need not be impaired or jeopardized.

Nay, the tracts of history upon which the eyes of Reason and Imagination dwell with the most unalloyed complacency, are not those which have been most resplendent with the illumination of letters, and polished by the arts of civilization. It is in communities where unlettered poverty has been embowed by a pure and beautiful simplicity of manners, that we find the most illustrious examples of patriotism, and the most lovely portraits of domestic peace.

But that you may discern the true pillar of social happiness and security, consider what would be the condition of a society unsupported by Religion. Let not your imagination run to savage tribes in search of an example. The race most blinded and depraved whose abode is marked on the map of any continent, or whose character is painted in the annals of any age, are not without Religion; God hath not left them entirely without witness: and we hesitate not to affirm, that in the most grotesque and distorted creed, considered as a system, that ever deluded mankind, there are yet fountains of truth, and plants of nourishment, and fenses of beneficial restraint over the corrupt propensities of Man, which render it far better adapted to his moral nature, than the sickly and sterile wastes of a libertine atheism. Moreover, when it dwells with Ignorance, freemasonry also is blind and impotent, and the scope of its ravage is circumscribed. In order to conceive its effects in their most appalling development, we must look nearer home than the haunts of savage simplicity—to a country where the energies of mind are free and salutary, and the taper of knowledge diffuses a wide and brilliant illumination; and where, as the sphere of perception is dilated, and the avenues of gratification are extended and multiplied, the stimuli of evil passion are in the same proportion sharp, its impulses forcible, its machinations subtle, and its suggestions audacious.

There, also, the source and authority of merely social laws and safeguards being exposed to common and unceremonious criticism, they no longer command that implicit reverence with which Ignorance regards prescription: and the spirit which discord their humble and imperfect original, is apt to be disdainful of their sanctions, unless the eye of knowledge is directed upward to another Power and other laws, unapproachable, unassailable, and fitted to inspire that awe and dread which is to the dissolve the only barrier against transgression. Among such a people, let us suppose the institutions of the gospel fall, by violence or neglect. The beacon-lights of religion are extinguished; the restraints of religion are cast loose; the impression which hearts the most reckless and abandoned receive from the presence and the reflex influence of religion is obliterated. There is no Christian teaching to instruct or warn, there is no Christian example to awe or attract, there is no Christian sentiment to curb or purify; there is no Christian education to form that bias to which amidst all subsequent distortion there is still an elastic tendency, or to implant those hardy seeds which in spirit long parched with unholy passions will be still not dead, though dormant. But the men of this intelligent and refined society rely for moral guidance on intellectual light, and for moral support on intellectual

strength, checked by no fears but worldly fears, moved by no inducements but subliminary inducements, bound by no laws but human laws, having no thoughts or motives or desires but such as are of the earth, earthly: career to the grave beyond which they have neither hope nor dread, as if, shortlived, shortsighted, and impotent as they are, the Universe enthroned no Power superior, and heaven were “but a painted ceiling hung with lamps, to light them to their purposes.” Whither would their condition tend! Behold the torches of Knowledge not elevated to enlighten, but brandished to consume. Behold the zeal of Enterprise rushing to the designs of human industry, but of plunder. Behold the vigor of Intellect strained not to construct, but to ruin, behold the attractions of Art displayed, not to refine, but to pollute and deprave. Political freedom is lapsed to that social state which is farthest and lowest removed from it—personal license and insecurity. All human emotions are centred in selfishness—all barriers of law overleaped and contemned—all moral restraints relaxed and submerged—all vicious propensities rioting in the openess of day. Nothing is criminal but weakness, nothing wretched but innocence; every tie that binds man to man is disregarded and trampled, and every sanctuary of affection is invaded and desecrated. Knowledge is the Power that works all this ruin and misery because when the principle languishes and expires by which it should be directed to lawful objects, and wielded for the general advantage, it becomes a mine to blow up the bulwarks of society, instead of serving as munition for their defence. Every blessing of civilization is transformed to a curse—every instrument that should strengthen and adorn society, becomes a weapon to pierce its vitals. Meanwhile, corruption taints and festishes even the instrument which it abuses: until at last, when the pure principle of virtue has ceased to clarify the oil of intelligence, the lamp expires in the foul atmosphere which its own effluvium has created.

Say not that all this is fancy. It is plain reason, illustrated by notorious fact. The folly of imposing upon intelligence the moral functions of Christianity, is precisely the doctrine preached by the infidels of the last century, and of whose practical operation the world was witness, in the unparalleled horrors of the French Revolution. Then in the most refined nations, its triumph wrought for the vaunted dignity of human nature, a decree of philosophic legislation that Death is an everlasting Sleep—for the honor of Intellect and the perfection of Mores, it caused the Goddess of Reason to be worshipped in the person of a harlot: for the credit of Liberty, it procured, in the language of a victim rotary, * that crimes should be committed in her name;—for the common peace and welfare it loosed upon society the furies of terror, and suspicion, and impurity, and slaughter. It is a doctrine not seldom countenanced among us, by men who are set as watchmen for the defence of society against the incursions of moral evil; and whose baneful tendency is not corrected by the circumstances that it is introduced unconsciously, and comes in with stealthiness. Let it never be sanctioned by your lips, or pass by your ears unchallenged. Let the claims of secular knowledge be advocated on their proper ground; there is room enough for zeal, and motive enough for exertion in that cause, without elevating Intelligence to the post which Religion only can maintain; without substituting the light of Reason for the light of Conscience, without relying on the love of Knowledge for that

* Madame Toland.
which can only be effected by the fear of God. That sound moral sentiment which is the vital warmth of society, is an emanation from the Sun of Righteousness, and not from the torch of Intelligence. Virtue is not the natural product of a cultivated understanding. Men may become “purchasers of the divine nature, and escape the corruption that is in the world through lust,” only “through the knowledge of Him who hath called them to glory and virtue.”

My friends, you are indebted for all that you value as citizens, as families, and souls,—you are indebted for just laws and peaceful firesides, for public morals and private security, to the Religion of Christ: to that Gospel of Peace, which you must support as individuals, if as a society you desire its blessings. If, therefore, you observe a perceptible deterioration of the public morals; if you are impressed with a reluctant conviction, that the tone of public virtue is sensibly declining; if frequent excesses and crimes startle you as with a lightning evidence that the safeguards of law are enfeebled, and the bonds of society are relaxing; if high-handed fraud and lawless bloodshedding have become so familiar that the social feeling is slightly sensitive, and often jests where indignation and tears should be its tribute: consider what is the the cause whence these alarming indications arise, and where is the proper remedy. Consider how far they should be ascribed to the inadequacy of the religious means of your country for the supply of its daily multiplying moral necessities:—consider that this inadequacy is chargeable solely to individual neglect and delinquency: consider that unless arrested by individual liberality and exertion, this must be a progressive evil, advancing in the giant strides of your country’s advance in that sort of growth which is not the evidence of moral health, or the earnest of political stability; and that the effort which might be useful to-day, may to-morrow be ineffectual. And consider how you have hitherto discharged this most sacred obligation. As an American citizen, boasting the blessings and pledged to the maintenance of a voluntary system, let every man of you consider how much he has done, how much he may do without feeling any sacrifice, to diffuse the benefits and establish the institutions of pure religion. And let us all rally around and elevate the Cross, not only as the source of salvation, to which whosoever looketh shall have eternal life, but as the palladium of private security, and the ensign of social welfare. Let us extend the vivifying influence of the gospel over the whole country, and like the prophet stretched over the dead child, it will restore life and healthfulness to the body politic. Then society will be safe from the storm of misrule, and the miasm of moral corruption. Then our land shall yield her increase, and our God shall give her His blessing; her wilderness shall be like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.

It is on such considerations, as well as others more directly attaching to its holy purposes, that the work for which we are assembled should be hailed as an occasion of congratulation, and hallowed as a season of prayer. Reverend Brother,* and you, good brethren of his spiritual charge, we rejoice that God hath put it into your hearts to build an house to Him, and we pray that He may bring to good effect all your intentions and desires to the glory of His name, the good of His Church, and the safety, honor, and welfare of His people. We rejoice to behold the open-

* The Rev. Samuel George Litton, Rector of Immanuel Church.
ing of a perenniial fountain of spiritual blessings; blessings of such gen-
erous nature as will not terminate in the hearts which first imbibe them,
but every recipient shall be in his sphere their agent and dispenser, while
they flow throughout society with a wide diffusion, and descend in count-
less channels from generation to generation. We rejoice to behold the
promise of a permanent beacon of the gospel, to guide souls aright which
are tossed on the waves of this troublesome world: a beacon which will
not delude the voyager with a floating and dubious ray, but flame steadily
and purely on that gospel pillar, which is built on the foundations of the
Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone.
For you have chosen that structure of heavenly model, which, while the
tide of mutability sweeps over the surface of human action, is one glo-
rious exception to the doom of change; which, built upon the Rock of Ages,
and treasuring for eternity the hopes of Man, has withstood and shall with-
stand the surge of centuries, unimpaired in the strength which supports
its massive bulwarks, unmarred in the tracery which adorns them: the
same, both in stability and in beauty, to all generations of our race.—
Thus you are free from any damping apprehension, that your pious un-
dertaking may be hereafter abused to the propagation of erroneous and
strange doctrine, contrary to God's word; thus, as Christian fathers and
citizens, you have provided scope and means for the permanent exercise of
that religious agency, which beyond all others is conservative of the peace
of families and the safety of communities, and has a peculiar adaptation
to the social exigences, and evils and apprehensions, which darken and
oppress the land. Here you will treat the same sacred courts which were
pressed by the feet of the early martyrs, and the same worship in the
beauty of holiness will be familiar to your hearts, and the hearts of your
children. Here the wayfaring brother of our communion shall turn aside,
and be refreshed in his travel, as by the shadow of a great rock in a weary
land. Here the poor shall find that godliness which is great riches;
here the afflicted shall be led forth by the waters of comfort; here the
ignorant shall be made wise unto salvation; here the fallen shall be
raised up and the feeble supported; yes, here, through the power of
Messiah, the spiritually blind shall receive their sight, the lame shall leap
as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; the lepers shall be cleansed,
the demoniacs dispossessed, and the dead in trespasses and sins arise,
and walk in newness of life. Here He who walketh in the midst of the
golden candlesticks, the churches of His love, will vouchsafe His peculiar
presence. Here you will find a sanctuary from the anxieties and distrac-
tions of this mortal life; and peaceful sabbaths will be sweet stages of
repose, while you journey as strangers and pilgrims towards that City
which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. May He be
with you to the close of your pious labor; may the sacred task to which
it will be hallowed, be crowned with His grace and heavenly benediction;
And may He direct you in your ways, and further you with his continual
help, that in all your works you may glorify His holy name, until you
come to His everlasting kingdom! — Amen.