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LETTER

TO

REV. NATHANIEL HALL,

OF DORCHESTER, MASS.

BY NAHUM CAPEN,

CONCERNING

POLITICS AND THE PULPIT.

BOSTON AND CAMBRIDGE:

JAMES MUNROE & COMPANY

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REV. NATHANIEL HALL,

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POLITICS AND THE PULPIT.

PUBLISHED BY JAS. MUNROE & CO., BOSTON AND CAMBRIDGE.

MT. IDA, DORCHESTER, SEPT. 8, 1855.

MY DEAR SIR—In asking your deliberate consideration of thoughts, respectfully submitted in the following letter, with regard to POLITICS IN THE PULPIT, which have been suggested and elicited by recent events, and which there is no present occasion to recite, no doubt is entertained but you will give to the subject that serious and candid scrutiny for which your established habits of sincerity have been so long distinguished.

That the motives which originated this communication may not be misunderstood, nor misconstrued, I beg leave to speak of the dignity and responsibility of the ministerial calling, and while all who concur with me in opinion, feel it to be their duty to claim for it a considerate protection, they would not divest it of its high and sacred character, nor derogate from its prerogatives of independence.

They believe that the servants of Christ should imitate his examples—by teaching the great and sublime truths of Christianity to all people of different origin, minds, habits, culture, opinions, and under the varying circumstances of civilization, government, freedom, education, prosperity, adversity, goodness, crime, peace, war, or revolution. Christianity is a system of duty for the guidance of men under all the circumstances of life, whether public or private, pleasurable or painful, and not a system for the conformity of opinions on any subject, except it be on

those fundamental principles recognized by all Christian denominations, and which are to be found in the attributes of Deity.

The Christian teacher cannot create the conscience of the individual nor command the adoption of opinions—the reasonableness of which he cannot see, nor the manifestation of sentiments, the reality of which he cannot feel.

The most that he can hope to accomplish, is to exercise and keep alive the conscience to all that belongs to integrity and justice, to elevate the standard of duty in the adoption of opinions deliberately formed, and to insist upon a practice that shall be in harmony with the declared will of God, and those laws and constitutions of men which, according to their best judgment and knowledge, from time to time, are ordained by general consent for the common good of society. As he cannot divest the individual of his moral responsibility, he can claim no right to dictate opinions for his adoption which his enlightened judgment does not approve.

He is the teacher of duty to the rich and to the poor, without the authority of controlling the property of either; he is the religious adviser of the young and aged, but not their political guardian; he is the appointed exhorter of the reckless and the wicked, but not their governor nor keeper; he is the chosen consoler of the afflicted and dying, but not their judge; he should be the counsellor of statesmen of all parties,

but not the offensive partizan of any; he should be the spiritual and independent adviser of the magistrate, in the numerous positions of authority and official duty, but not the controlling gatherer of his knowledge, the responsible agent of his power, the director of his opinions, nor the arbiter of his acts. He should give to the legislator the inspiring benefit of his prayers, encourage in him an honest zeal for investigation, increase in him the love of truth, the sentiment of self-respect and duty, and leave him to act according to the judgment which he deliberately forms by the help of so many Christian aids. He is a preacher of the gospel to all men, of all nations; the guardian of souls exposed to temptation, against the dangers of sin in its hideous variety, against oppression in violation of law, the promoter of peace according to law, the encourager of duty in seasons of danger; but he is invested with no authority by his Divine Master to assume the prerogatives of private judgment, nor to denounce his fellow sinners for non-concurrence in matters of opinion on subjects in regard to which the good and the able of the entire community are divided, and where the cause of truth demands a perfect freedom, exempted from all party and sectarian dictation.

What air and light are to the body, Christianity is to the soul: it constitutes the indispensable elements of healthful growth and spiritual existence. It ennobles the motives to lofty endeavor, it encourages endeavor according to the stern requisitions of integrity; it enlivens the affections, but it does not seek to control their application; it creates a thirst for knowledge, and engenders a love for truth in the man, the woman and the child of every condition and in every pursuit of life, but it leaves each to choose his path, and to walk his way, according to his conscience and his knowledge. It is a mission above and beyond the temporary expedients and excitements incident to the stormy conflicts of opinion. Its guiding hand should not be obscured by the clouds of passion nor stiffened by the hand of bigotry, but it should be seen pointing upward to the serener atmosphere of a confident hope, an abiding faith, a practical charity. It is a mission to the world in its diversity, and its most glorious themes are those which invest the spirit of controversy with a dignified forbearance, and the power of knowledge with the sublime beauty of meekness.

In protesting, as an humble citizen, against the practice of introducing political topics into the pulpit, with a party spirit—a practice which it is to be regretted too much prevails for the best good of the mission of religious instruction—I beg most distinctly and emphatically to disclaim all purposes tending to

narrow the sphere of the Christian minister, or to lessen the means of his usefulness. On the contrary, most with whom I have exchanged opinions upon the subject, are deeply impressed with the importance of enlarging the sphere of his mission—investing it with a higher character, loftier aims, holier aspirations, and with a more extended knowledge, and comprehensive views. It is to be viewed as a mission to the people of all time, however divided by sects or parties, diffusing that spiritual dignity and benign temper of Christ among men, whose differences of thought and habits of feeling require the constant reproduction of his examples of love, and the repetition of his lessons of wisdom.

The subject of slavery, or more properly speaking, the way and the means of providing for the best good and advancement of the dependent races of men, is regulated by the enactments of government in states or civilized nations, and like all other subjects relating to humanity, and submitted for adjustment to the human judgment in conventional authority, is differently regarded by different men. Its regulation or removal is necessarily a business of a political nature, it is that of legislation, and it may be regarded as one of the most difficult problems which statesmen are called upon to solve. It is more a question of time, method and means, than of principle—to say nothing of the unjustifiable interference of citizens who assume the visionary right to aggravate its evils without sharing the realities of its burdens. It has been discussed by the learned, the good and the wise, during all time, and the discussion will be continued so long as man is subdivided into different races of varying capacity and condition, so long as man continues to be a being of progress. The process of Christian civilization is to be seen in periods of centuries, which are but moments to infinity, and the reverential student will not fail to find, in the historical lessons of Providence, that the same Almighty power that numbers and guards the sparrow in its flight and fall, no less protects and controls during all the transitions of humanity, his image in man. He will find that races and nations are advanced and elevated according to eternal laws, and by the unchangeable instrumentalities of infinite wisdom. He who studies and regards most those laws and means most conforms to the will of Him whose omniscience pervades eternity.

The discussion of slavery in this country has been so long and so impressively identified with fanaticism, impracticable measures of philanthropy, with the abrupt and revolting language of party and of impatient ignorance; with a morbid and sickening despondency—that would substitute days of fasting and

of mourning for those of national rejoicing, because a greater blessing was yet to be achieved; with reckless and culpable denunciations against law and the authority of government, and even with the desperate and malevolent breathings of treason against our beloved Union; with impious declamations against the Bible and the church; that it is difficult, nay, almost impossible, to divest it of its unholy associations, or to introduce it into the pulpit, with its correlative topics, without exciting anew all those extreme manifestations of indignation and disgust to which an offended patriotism is sure to give expression, and sellom attempts to disguise or to conceal.

Fanaticism is excessive zeal. It has its providential mission,—but like that of the whirlwind, it has no inherent self-directing power. Its track is ever characterised by the plunges of impatient haste and ill-timed violence. It demands a greater but an impracticable good. It is earnest in prayer and rapid in thought, but indifferent to knowledge and blind to judgment. It waits for no season, listens to no warning, and cares for no consequences. It invokingly holds up an abstract truth, detached from the practical conditions of society, and demands its instant adoption and impossible practice. It is prolific in its propositions, and it always assumes that their nature is imperative, urgent and holy, that their importance is paramount and unquestionable. They are rapidly and incessantly multiplied and forced upon the individual, the family, the school, the town, the state, the nation, and the pulpit. All need to be guarded with an unsleeping vigilance, but no place more sacredly than the Christian pulpit.

All men confess a desire to lessen slavery and to increase freedom; to check the prevalence of evil and to promote the sway of good; to withstand temptations to sin, and to encourage the spirit of duty; to advance truth and to suppress error; but they honestly and intelligently differ with regard to the best means for the accomplishment of ends so momentous to man—so acceptable to God.

The Christian minister, standing as he does, the professed servant of Divinity—commissioned by society to promulgate eternal truths revealed by God, and adapted to the condition and wants of humanity; to exhibit the spirit of his Divine Master by examples of loyalty to civil government; of fidelity to public and private trusts; of dignity and impartiality in the manner of presenting his convictions of truth and adjusting differences of opinion; of charity in speaking of the weaknesses and ignorance of men; of sublime simplicity in making known the will of the Father,—is placed in fearful relations of responsibility to God

and to the world,—whenever he presents himself as a teacher on subjects, not specially taught by his Divine Master, and which, to be truthfully set forth, require vast research, long and careful study, patient and practical inquiry, diversified observation, test comparisons, resulting verifications, and a profound self-distrust. To assume to be the teacher of men in the practical or experimental details and complications of government or of science, is to imply a consciousness of knowledge superior to that of the statesman and philosopher, and to claim them as his pupils. That he can do much, in the proper discussion of all great topics, to inspire the lovers of truth with a spirit of duty; in acquiring knowledge divested of pride and prejudice; by examples of thorough inquiry, comprehensive views, conciliatory manners, and of forbearance and magnanimity, and by a spirit of enlightened humility which should ever characterize the servant of Christ—all will admit, no one will deny. But who, let me ask, that is subject to the conditions of mortality, will deliberately assume, in addition to the great task of his Christian mission, the awful and immeasurable responsibility of teaching so much, in a life so brief, and with means so small.

Besides, as the clergy of different denominations represent the different views and sentiments of the varying parties of the nation, what would constitute a safe standard of conscience for one to adopt would be safe for all,—that is, each for himself and *no one for others*,—and the pulpit would be sought, controlled and used for the exciting and temporary discussions of the times, and the church would become the place for the manifestations of passion and violence, and the Sabbath the great caucus day of the land. Religion would become but another name for politics, and piety a cloak for cunning. The floating errors of party, the falsehoods of designing and unprincipled politicians,—always assuming the attractive garb of truth for deceptive purposes,—would be more or less received and honestly adopted by the credulous preacher, and sermons based upon deception, and prayers upon error would soon prevail and degrade the professed disciples of Christ to the common level of vulgar strife, and subject them and their mission to the contempt of considerate men, and obscure the fair beauties of Christianity by the unsightly deformities of sin.

The true conscience deeply scrutinizes itself, and employs an enlightened judgment to guard against the mistakes of ignorance, the impositions of the sinful, and the assumptions of will.

The Christian teacher is protected by law in his position as the dispenser of truth, and as he cannot be answered by the dissentients of his congregation in

respect to the possible fallacy of his views, nor be corrected if he communicates the falsehoods of others as truths to be adopted, he ignorantly becomes, for a time at least, a most dangerous though unintentional agent of the wicked, and inflicts upon his confiding and uninformed hearers, and upon society, a wound that irritates and mortifies the commendable pride of the hearer and lessens his respect for the preacher.

Let the great aim of the clergy be rather to influence men to become Christian citizens, and they will do a thousand times more for the safety of their government, for the advancement of humanity, and for the permanent sympathy for the oppressed everywhere, than by actively uniting themselves with the brief, fierce, and fluctuating struggles of party.

If, indeed, they are actuated by an irresistible sense of duty to participate in those movements which are connected with the legislation of their country, and desire to make known facts and opinions not communicated by others, the way is open at all times and everywhere,—and they may have opportunities to say more, and to do more, and to present their views to larger numbers, on special occasions, or by speaking at political meetings,—than they can possibly accomplish in the pulpit and within the hallowed circle of the Christian church.

The Sabbath and the sanctuary should be sorely protected against the breathings of angry disputation, the disorderly language of party violence, and the wild invective of passion—the invariable and legitimate fruits of political preaching to a congregation where members of the different parties are associated for religious worship. The Christian soul demands at church a quiet atmosphere, the cheerful serenity of a peaceful trust, the impressive associations of grandeur consistent with prayer, a dignity becoming the sublime spirit of truth, a glad-some temper that harmonizes with the Christian's hope, the exalting hymn, and the joyous anthem.

On all subjects of magnitude the great and the good, the learned and the wise, the pure and the holy, in all ages, have failed to unite in opinion as to the best plans for the advancement of the great cause of truth. The clergy, in common with all men, and with no special nor supernatural exemption from sin or error, have not either practically nor theoretically been able to harmonize even their own views with respect to the teachings of Christianity, and they profess to

realize an inward sense of glory on account of their differences; and while no one would presume to arraign them for their diversity of opinion with regard to the true means of progress and course of duty, it cannot be claimed with any show of meekness or Christian propriety that they are authorized to require a conformity in others which they are unable to secure among themselves.

This communication was substantially prepared for signatures of such members of your church and society as might concur with the views expressed. In reviewing, however, the circumstances and the motives which led me to write it; in considering the magnitude of the subject and the expressed wishes of several highly respected and intelligent gentlemen, who desired to give the letter a circulation commensurate with the nature and importance of the questions involved; in wishing to avoid all proselyting anxiety, or seeming solicitation, incompatible with a confidence in principle, which is above and superior to the conviction of mere verbal persuasion, and in the hope that it would have a tendency to lead to unrestrained exchanges of opinion upon the subject,—I have asked the written committal of no one, that all may be free deliberately and intelligently to form their own conclusions, each for himself, and without embarrassment of any supposed antagonism between individuals either of the family or of the social circle.

I have written with a deep sense of responsibility, from which no American citizen, however humble, should feel himself exempted. I have endeavored faithfully to examine, though briefly, those serious and delicate relations of accountability, which no member of a Christian community, however imperfect, should seek to evade or to suppress. I have not hesitated to express myself with a freedom and a frankness alike due to the spirit of sincerity and to the cause of truth, in the confidence that you will appreciate my motives as you may hope to have others appreciate yours, and will regard the imperfect suggestions which have been made rather with a view to public duty than with any feeling of personal considerations or of party differences.

I have the honor to be, with considerations of respect and true regard, your most obedient servant and friend,

NATHAN CAPEX.

To REV. NATHANIEL HALL, Dorchester, Mass.



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