

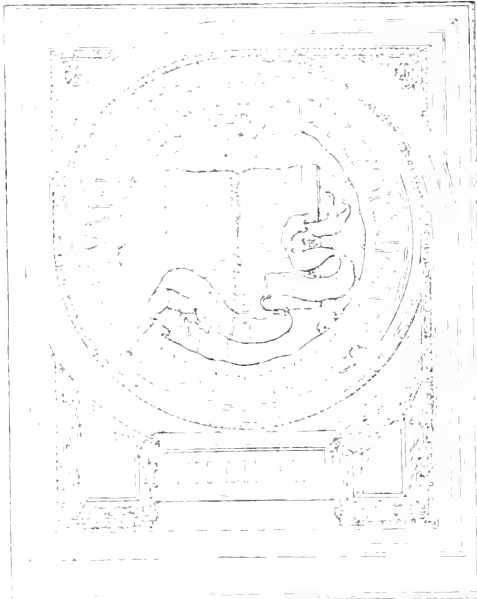
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ROBERT ERNEST COWAN

A S E R M O N

FOR THE PRESBYTERIES OF

San Francisco and San José,

— ON —

MINISTERIAL DEPOSITION

AND

ECCLESIASTICAL NON-INTERCOURSE.

By Rev. HENRY WARD BEECHER.

O A K L A N D :

OAKLAND DAILY NEWS BOOK AND JOB PRINTING OFFICE.

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MODERN EXCOMMUNICATION,

A SERMON

PREACHED BY

HENRY WARD BEECHER.

IN

PLYMOUTH CHURCH, BROOKLYN, N. Y.

Sunday Evening, May 31, 1868.

[The first portion of this discourse refers to the case of the man who received his sight at the hands of the Saviour, and who, for persisting in saying that Christ opened his eyes on the Sabbath day, was cast out of the Synagogue by the Pharisees.—John ix, 35-38.]

It may seem needless to preach on the subject of excommunicating men from the church; but the ecclesiastical power of the church over men's convenience, over their comfort, over their profit, over their good name, and over their influence in society, although it is very much abated, is still not insignificant; and now and then there are paroxysms of this ecclesiastical spirit breaking out, even in our day, and manifesting itself in such a manner as to make it worth our while to look a little at the grounds of and reasons for these things.

One minister is unfellowshipped because he insists upon his right to commune at the Lord's table with other acknowledged Christians, though they have not been baptized by immersion. He has violated no canon of morality. He has not fallen from faith in any important or fundamental doctrine. He has simply

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violated a custom, an ordinance, a usage of an ecclesiastical church.

Another minister is disciplined for preaching Christ without asking leave of a man who holds ecclesiastical title to certain territory. It is not alleged that he has preached a false doctrine, or that he is not worthy to preach at all. He has simply violated a man-made custom in a Christian church or sect.*

Another man—George H. Stuart, known and beloved in two hemispheres, wherever zeal, liberality and Christian activity are prized—has been excommunicated; and, in God's name, for what?

For singing hymns instead of singing psalms! Nothing else, and nothing more! For there is one sect of Presbyterians in this country who have agreed among themselves that if any man sings anything but the Psalms of David he shall be cast out! But do they sing the Psalms of David themselves? If they sang Hebrew they could be called consistent, but not otherwise. However, this is a regulation of that church, and George H. Stuart sang Watts' Hymns, and they excommunicated him, at Pittsburg, this last week. It is the *Reformed* Presbyterian Church. I should like to know what its condition was before it was reformed!

Such and suchlike things are occurring not unfrequently; and, since such things are likely to occur, it is time that we should apply that corrective which belongs to us in this land—namely, the enlightened public sentiment of the intelligent Christian men of all churches. And, in behalf of men excommunicated from any sect whatever—not for immorality, nor for the violation of fundamental faith, but merely for violating human regulations or customs—in behalf of them all, I appeal from the judicatory to the enlightened sentiment of the Christian community, without regard to sect.

It is said that it is indispensable to the maintenance of religious organizations, that men who join themselves to any sect, or to any church, and consent to abide by its rules and regulations, take the result of such violation. It is declared that if intelligent men join a sect or a church, they ought to do it with their

eyes open ; and that if, when their eyes are really opened, they find themselves to have entered it upon mistaken ground, and see that they can no longer conform to the requirements of that church, their duty is to leave it ; but that in no case have they a right to violate the ordinances, the rules, the customs, or the canons, of any sect or church which they have promised to keep. Logically considered, this is correct. "Certainly," it is said, "if a man has agreed in joining a body to maintain the rules of that body, and he violates them, he must go out ; either willingly or by expulsion." And that is supposed to end the question. But no, it just begins it. Under such circumstances the question arises, or ought to arise in any enlightened community, What is the nature of that church or that sect in which a good, a just, a holy, a true man cannot stay ? What is the nature of an organization in which a man that is honest and fearless, a man that is enterprising and zealous, a man that is useful, and proves himself such before God and before men, cannot stay ? And the question then becomes this : Has any body of men a right so to organize religion ? I hold that all men have an interest in the common religion that is revealed, and that is emphasized, and ratified, and applied through the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in the name of our common Christianity, you and I have a right to protest against any organization which makes it impossible for a clean, pure, true, right man to sit in it, and that casts a man out of it under any pretence of violating canons, rules or regulations in any way which does not invalidate nor implicate his true, manly, Christian character.

"Have we not a right to organize as we please?" you say. As between yourselves and human law, you have. So far as human law is concerned, men have a right to organize in such a manner as that nobody could belong to the church who did not measure exactly five feet eight inches. There is no reason in human law why the church might not ordain in its rules and regulations that no man should belong to its organization who did not weigh a given number of pounds. There is no human law against men's decreeing that none shall be admitted to the church except by the carpenter's rule, or by the scales, - without

being weighed or measured. But has the church, in the Court of Conscience, under the inspiration of enlightened judgment, or according to the teachings of Scripture, a right to take our common religion and enclose it in an organization that is man-made, and that is prescribed by human wisdom in such a way that religion itself is put to shame by the mode in which it is administered? It has no such moral right. It is right for any church, in things indifferent, to ordain things for which there is no pattern in Scripture. There is no pattern in Scripture for common schools, and yet we have a right to common schools. There is no pattern in Scripture for Sunday schools, and yet we have a right to Sunday schools. There is no law in the New Testament for the observance of the Jewish Sabbath, if we believe that that is the true Sabbath. There is no special commandment in the New Testament to observe the Lord's Day instead of the Jewish Sabbath, and yet it is not only expedient, but right and proper so to do. But while we have a right to organize churches in such a manner as conduces to education and devotion, we have not a right to insist upon human ordinances when they are brought into collision with true manly character, when they sacrifice just and noble qualities for the sake of an ordinance.

The Pharisees would not believe in Christ because he healed this man on the Sabbath—thereby, as they alleged, violating a church canon. All the moral splendor of the miracle; all the noble humanity that was manifested by it; all that the city, and the state, and the world, had gained by reforming a man and elevating him to activity and usefulness; the wonder of the miracle which consisted in giving manhood and plenary power to a degraded and helpless man—this was nothing. But because he had done it on that conventional day he was not godly, he was not a prophet, he was not a good man—and he and the beneficiary were both thrust out, with contempt, from the synagogue. You know very well, that there was no right in the synagogue to thrust out a man for such a cause, even two thousand years ago, and in another nation, and if you bring to mind the facts, you will all say, "It was a mean thing; it was a narrow thing;

it was an unmanly thing." They ought to have been so glad of the moral revolution in this man, and of the display of Divine power and humanity in his amelioration, that the wonder of the moral element should transcend all thought of the violation of a mere agreement or compact. You think so in respect of Judea, but how is it in regard to New York? How is it in regard to a sect in our own time, in which perhaps some of you have been bred, in which you have dear friends, and which is a useful, and, God be thanked, widely extended sect. When you at the present time, sit in judgment upon the same state of facts, how do you feel? If this case was wrong ages ago, then identical or parallel cases are wrong to-day,

Elaborate organizations of Christianity are liable to the perversion of the powers of religion, and to gross persecutions and oppressions. So far as it is abstractly considered, there is no reason why men should not organize themselves as artificially and complicatedly as they please; but artificial and complicated ecclesiastical organizations are peculiarly liable to perversion. I think them to be unwise, because they are laborious, they are expensive to maintain, they draw men's attention from weightier matters of spiritual life, and they become mere engineers—servers of machinery. As much effort is required to keep up elaborate organizations as is necessary to preach the Gospel itself. And at last the body not only does not serve the spirit, but oppresses it. Churches oftentimes are like old men who are full of rheumatisms, full of gouts, full of all manner of infirmities, and are oppressed by obstacles rather than served by helps. Yet if men prefer elaborate organizations, they have a civil right to them; but they have no right by them to oppress any man. It is said, "When a church asserts its own authority according to its prescribed rules does it persecute?" It does persecute. It is said, "It does not subject a man to any odium or any penalty: it says—not, You shall not go into the kingdom of God by any other church, but—You shall not remain in this church." Well, is not that persecution? Consider how men go into churches. Consider what the process of transplanting is. Consider the temptations and inconveniences and interferences that it involves. Consider

what suffering and odium take place when men, for no moral wrong, are told to walk out of a church. If a church was like a hotel where the landlord goes to a man and says, "You are in the wrong room, and we have no other room for you, and you must go somewhere else;" he would have nothing else to do but to pack his trunk, and go somewhere else, and it would be all right. But a church is not like a hotel. It is more like farming ground. Here is a large oak tree that was planted as a small tree in a rich soil, and has been growing for twenty or thirty years, and now its roots spread far and wide. Contiguous to it are other trees, that hold a council, and say to this tree, "Look here, you are beginning to overshadow us, and you must clear out. You have a right to be an oak tree, and to throw out your roots; but you shall not have them here any longer. Get you up and begone!" No persecution! Oh no! Is it so easy, then, for an oak to pull up its roots and walk off and live somewhere else? Can you take all the ramifications of a great tree and transfer them, and do the tree no harm?

Now men root a thousand times broader than a tree, by sympathy, by love, by custom, by habit, in a church in which they are brought up. And when you take a man and pull up his roots, and cast him out from a church where he has formed associations and attachments, do you say that you do him no harm, because he can go to the Methodist Church or the Baptist Church, or wherever he pleases? Is it not an oppression? Is it not an outrage? Churches that excommunicate their members, merely because they do not obey canons and rules, put canons and rules higher than they do faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They admit that a man is a praying man, a holy man, and a useful man; but his conscience is set against a certain thing, and they say to him, "You must go out." And I hear some persons under such circumstances say, "He ought to go out and not stay in the church, if he cannot obey its canons."

But I pray you to consider what it is to be put out of a church for no breach of morality. Is it not persecution? There are two sorts of persecution—the major and the minor. The minor is where a man is fined; where he is imprisoned; where he is

put in jail ; where his goods are sequestered. And sometimes an inflammatory course is taken with men, and, for the benefit of their souls, their bodies are purged with fire ; but this is called by all persecution. I call it persecution, too ; but it is the minor persecution, because they have power to slay the body, and that is the end of it. The major persecution is where a man lives and the magistrate does not meddle with him, and the church does not harm him outwardly, *but only blasts him !* It shuts the door against him. It takes the table of communion from him. It refuses him all fellowship and love and confidence. It denies him those very things on which the soul subsists. It takes away from him that which makes life worth having. It makes him a marked man ; so that the children, hearing their parents talking of his being cast out of the church, shrink from him, and supposing him to be some monster, look for his horns and hoofs. They torment his soul. Is there no persecution in that ? I tell you that moral intolerance is a great deal more hideous than civil intolerance ; and I think there is no punishment so wicked and so unauthorized by reason and conscience as that which you inflict upon a good, right-living, true-hearted man, merely because he differs from you on a doctrine or on a ritual. I affirm the individual right of Christian men. I stand upon that broad ground, which was first taught by Christ, that God receives all men that worship him as a Spirit in sincerity and in truth. Speaking to the woman of Samaria, Jesus said, “ Whosoever worships God anywhere, after any form, in sincerity and in truth, him God accepts.” And, following the example of the Master, I stand on the same ground, declaring, in the words which I read in your hearing at the opening service, “ Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant ?”—saying it on the supposition that every one of us belongs to and is the servant of God. We are the Lord’s while living, and we are his while dying. I am the Lord’s more than I am yours. The humblest and poorest here is the Lord Jesus Christ’s more than he is mine, though I am his pastor. He is Christ’s more than he is his brethren’s, though he is a member of this church. And the Apostle says, “ Every Christian man—God has received him.”

Now, who are you that dare sit in judgment on a man when he is received of God? When a man gives evidence that God has received him, he has a right to church fellowship. Are we holier than God, that we should refuse to hold fellowship with a man whom God accepts, though he may differ from us in belief? I have a right to say to him, "Let me exhort you, my own beloved brother, to your safety, and to the peace and harmony of the church, to be a temperance man, a total abstinence man;" nevertheless, if for reasons that seem to him wise and good, he says, "I cannot take that ground," and if he gives evidence that he is in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, I have no authority to exclude him, and you have no authority to expel him. In other words, the ground of acceptance in churches is this: That a man shall be Christian in spirit; that he shall be a true follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the moment you have evidence that he is such, that settles the question. He has a right to fellowship in the church, and you have no right to deprive him of it. Once in the church, he has a right to remain there so long as he lives a godly life and continues to give evidence in his spirit and in his conduct that God accepts him. I stand on the ground of the liberty of the individual Christian; and I say that it is to buffet Christ, it is to insult and assail Jehovah, when, for any reason less than the violation of Christian character or moral obligation, you excommunicate from the church any man in whom Christ lives, in whom God dwells. To use the authority of an ecclesiastical organization for this purpose is to pervert it—is to destroy the individual liberties of a Christian for the sake of maintaining a religious establishment, and I will tell you just where this spirit came from. It is the old Roman spirit. What was the idea of Rome in this matter? It was that the unit was society. Individual rights were scarcely known. What were men good for? They were good to build up the nation and the empire. The idea had not been disclosed and developed as Christianity has disclosed and developed it, and the individual is an empire; that each man is, himself a kingdom of wealth; and that the power of any nation, rightly organized, resides in the inherent strength of each one of its units. Modern civiliza-

tion undertakes to make the state stronger by developing the individual man, on every side, and so making as much of him as possible. The Roman doctrine was that the state, that the government was more important than the individual. Therefore men were built up like bricks. What is a brick good for? Nothing except so far as it helps to make the wall of a temple, a pyramid, or other building. And when the wall is built, that is all we look upon. The bricks are lost sight of. But not so with the individual in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a tree, and not a wall composed of dead brick. Every single branch has a separate identity; every branch is rooted into every other; but each has its own individual vitality and power to germinate and bring forth first, flowers, and then fruit.

The peculiarity of Christianity is this—that it proclaims and guards the liberty of the individual, the liberty of his conscience and judgment, and the liberty of his actions, and makes life in the individual supremely sacred. Churches that think that governments are more important than the rights of individual men are Roman churches, of whatever sect they may be. The man that uses a church organization to sacrifice individual liberty is Roman, heathen, despotic.

There are signs that this subject has got to be more largely considered and more largely discussed. They are not signs that alarm me; but they are signs that show that there would be danger if we did not comprehend and forestall and resist them. I am heartily glad to see growing unity. I do not believe in ecclesiastical unity. The age has gone by in which you are to do much in that way. It would make no difference to me if every single town had a church with a new name. The only things that are going to be fruitful—the only things that are going to be permanent, in this world, are the things in which men have unity—unity of feeling; but not unity in ecclesiastical governments—not unity in worship. This is of no importance whatsoever. But there are a great many good men who differ in this matter. There are some who think that the power of a church is in its compact physical organization. And, therefore, it is now sought to organize all Presbyterian churches into one.

Let them do it. God speed them, if there is any good in it. But I do not consider that they are thereby going to augment their moral influence. The evil consists in the bad manners exhibited by churches towards each other. The mischief consists in the quarrelsome-ness of sects. There might be as many different sects as there are families in a neighborhood, and no harm would come of it if there was spiritual unity. That is my confidence. If men have a feeling of Christian brotherhood, if men have a common love to God and a common reverence for humanity, if men are really one in mind and spirit, if men are truly united, spiritually, then the more variety you have the richer you are. The world is not rich by reason of identities, but by reason of variations. Who would send out a mission to turn all the trees of the forest into one tree? Which tree would you select? Why, when we plant trees, we put in twenty or thirty or forty different species, and the arboretum is the richer for it. Who would, if he could do so, change all flowers into one immense unity flower? What flower should it be? Is not the prairie purpled every spring and summer with varieties of plants and flowers, and is it not gorgeous from their diversity? Is it not their difference that makes flowers so beautiful and attractive? One new flower is enough to drive a true botanist mad for awhile. Why? Simply because it is different from everything else? And yet, how do we see men attempting to hew down churches. There are men now who are striving with all their might to unite all Christian churches in one, and make one great church, as if the world would be the better for it. One immense unity—no variety! That is to say, all sing just alike—I would not go near them! All preach just alike—I would get tired to death of them! All think just alike—I would not believe a word of any of them! It is not possible for men to think just alike. It is contrary to human nature. And yet men are attempting to make churches like so many machines, into which clay is thrown and which turns out brick just eight inches long, four inches broad, and two inches thick. There are men who would make the church a machine that should turn out Christians of just such a size and shape. That does for bricks, but does not

answer for men. When God makes men, he makes them like trees with branches, and some branches are parallel, some point heavenward, and some droop to the ground. And He that makes the clouds with infinite draperies, and in gorgeous colors; He that never makes the sun to rise twice alike, and that never makes the sun go down twice alike; He that sends the same seasons differently; He that makes the fields rich with diversities—He seems to study variety, as if his populous thoughts sought new modes of disclosing themselves. He writes his name differently in every spot. And is it to be supposed that He made an exception where men are organized to be the body of the Lord Jesus—as if that kind of stale, useless, homely, lap-sided unity was the thing to be sought? I abhor it. It is a phantasm. It is a superstition received from Rome. Kick it out! Let that be excommunicated! Let the members stay in.

The tendencies are to organize greater and greater power in churches; to employ that power more and more to control men's feeling, their morals and their course of life; to augment penalties if members do not conform to man-made standards. These tendencies I do not much fear; but there is a time of revival in them, and we feel their power in the community. Let true men, therefore, find what the true ground is—the God-made liberty of the individual man in believing; the responsibility of a man in his belief to his Maker and not to his fellow men; the liberty of the organization; the right of a man to cohere with his fellow men—with his brethren and sisters of every name—though he may not be in the same company, nor in the same battalion, nor in the same regiment. The doctrine of the right of an individual carries in it the power to repress and restrain whatever there is of mischief, and to bring into use whatever there is good without carrying with it the corresponding abuse.

There is but one other point that I will make to-night, and I do it to guard you from the impression that the tenor or spirit of this discourse is one that assaults particular churches or individual churches. Far from it. I have the advantage of most churches. I own them, though they will not own me. I own the Methodists, and the Baptists, and the various other Christian

denominations. He that takes in others owns them. Now my heart is big enough to take them all in. I do take them in, and they are mine—fathers and mothers, and brethren and sisters—And I rejoice in it. Let me see a Methodist church that is laboring to spread the Gospel that I will refuse to fellowship with. Let me see a Presbyteretian church that is building up the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, that I will not, with all my heart, bid God speed. Let me see a Baptist church that can put through the Jordan more disciples than we can, in whose success I will not rejoice and bless God. Let me see an Episcoeal church, that is doing God's work, that I will not give thanks for as much as the best priest of them all.

According to the very tenor of this discourse, I believe in sects, not only in what you have already, but in many more. Multiply their number. I think that no harm but that much good would come of it, if the churches that now exist were divided and subdivided. Fine flour makes better bread than coarse; and I think if our churches were ground a little more, it would make better churches of them. So long as they maintain the right spirit, their richness and efficiency will be increased by external diversity.

My heart is cordial. I am too liberal, perhaps you think. That is the difference of opinion between us.

What then, is our duty as Christian men in this emergency, and in these times?

First, where external churches are in trouble it is not right for us to stand derisively by and rejoice at their misfortunes. What if a church loses a bishop from immortality! Have you a right from that circumstance to draw an argument against bishops? What if a christian church that has arrogated to itself all the peace which comes with the spirit of Christ, falls into temptations and quarrels! Have you a right to say, "Ah! where is your peace? where is your harmony?" Would that be gentlemanly? Would it be decent, even in a neighborhood of gentlemen? Would it be christian? Why, my brother, my sister, every church in the land has something of Christ in it; something of His truth; something of His heart; something of His cleansing

blood; and some who are the disciples and children of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is not a church that falls into trouble that the woe is not in part mine. It belongs to Christendom. The obstructions, the hindrances, the divisions—they are mine. They do not argue one way or the other in respect to the questions that divide men—questions that do not need to be argued, and would not be, if there was a larger spirit allowed.

Now, you are Congregationalists in this church, and if a division should come up among our Methodist brethren on the subject of lay representation, you should pray, and I should pray, that God would use this question for his own honor in that denomination. Let them not be damaged by anything that you say or do. Men stand and see the troubles arising, or perhaps existing, in the Episcopal Church, and say, "Now, then, that church will be got out of the way, and we shall have the spoils." We do not want the spoils. Christians, is not the Episcopal church your church? Is it not my church? Where have I drawn the weapons with which I have contested with evils but from some of their most illustrious sons? Whence have come many of the most powerful aids by which I have been enabled to heal men's souls, and teach them the way to salvation, but from that Church? I am proud of their trophies, and when they put them upon their battlements, there is no envy in my heart. I own that church, and every church. I believe that Christ himself looks down from above upon every church that looks up and calls him Lord and master, and owns it as his. A true Christian spirit must do the same toward the Lord's children. And, my brethren, if a sect is brought into trouble, I pray God that they may safely come out of that trouble. Take care that you do not indulge in any feeling of envy or revenge. There is no Christianity in bitter sectarian feelings. Do not let them exist in your bosom. And if a sister church is so unfortunate as to contain corrupt elements, pray to God that he will purify them and make them more worthy of his name, and more worthy of your love. No church could seek to build itself up by pulling down another.

We have in regard to all the troubles that are going on in other churches around about us, aright to study their rise and progress, and the results which will flow from them; but we

have no right to be envious or revengeful, or unkind, or discourteous. On the other hand, instead of railing, it is our duty to pray more for other denominations. If we would criticise less, and pray more, I think the peace of the household would be promoted. I think friendship would be richer and more stable. I think neighborhoods would become more compact and more refined. We criticise too much; we rail too much; we rejoice too much in iniquity and not enough in truth. A true Christian disposition would lead us to endeavor, as far as possible, to see the good and rejoice in it, and to pray for the prosperity of Zion.

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,”—and Jerusalem is as wide as the out-spreading arms of Him that was crucified there—“if I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” “For my brethren’s sake, I will say,” to every denomination, “Peace be within thy walls.”

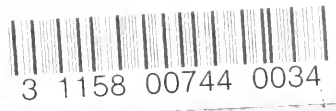
May God give power to Christ’s name, and grant to his disciples a nobler manhood, a wider sphere, ampler harvests, and a more glorious final ingathering, until the blessed day shall come when the angels shall be commissioned to fly through the heavens and proclaim, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and forever.”

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