

Special Directions for Christian Conference, Exhortation, and Reproof

By Richard Baxter

Tit. 1 Motives to Christian Conference and Exhortation.

The right use of speech being a duty of so great importance, as I have before showed about the government of the tongue; and it being a way of communication, by which we are all obliged to exercise our love to one another, even in the greatest matter, the saving of souls; I shall first endeavour to persuade them to this duty, who make too little conscience of it; and that by these following considerations.

Motive I. Consider that it is the exercise of our humanity: reason and speech do difference us from brutes. If by being reasonable we are men, then by using reason we live as men; and the first communicative use of reason is by speech: by thinking, we exercise reason for ourselves; by speaking, we exercise it (first) for others. Therefore if our reason be given us for the highest uses to ourselves, (to know God and eternal life, and the means thereto,) then certainly our speech is also given us for the same highest uses, by way of communication unto others. Use therefore your tongues to those noble ends for which they were given you. Use them as the tongues of men, to the ends which human nature is created for.

Motive II. There is no subject so sublime and honourable for the tongue of man to be employed about, as the matters of God, and life eternal. Children will talk of childish toys, and countrymen talk of their corn and cattle, and princes and statesmen look down on these with contemptuous smiles, as much below them: but crowns and kingdoms are incomparably more below the business of a holy soul! The higher subjects

philosophers treat of, the more honourable (if well done) are their discourses. But none is so high as God and glory.

Motive III. It is the most profitable subject to the hearers. A discourse of riches, at the most, can but direct them how to grow rich; a discourse of honours usually puffeth up the minds of the ambitious: and if it could advance the auditors to honour, the fruit would be a vanity little to be desired. But a discourse of God, and heaven, and holiness, doth tend to change the hearers' minds into the nature of the things discoursed of: it hath been the means of converting and sanctifying many a thousand souls. As learned discourses tend to make men learned in the things discoursed of, so holy discourses tend to make men holy. For as natural generation begetteth not gold or kingdoms, but a man; so speech is not made to communicate to others (directly) the wealth, or health, or honours, or an extrinsical things which the speaker hath; but to communicate those mental excellencies which he is possessed of. Prov. 16:21, 22, "The sweetness of the lips increaseth learning. Understanding is a well-spring of life to him that hath it." Prov. 10:13, 21, "In the lips of him that hath understanding, wisdom is found.--The lips of the righteous feed many." Prov. 15:7, "The lips of the wise disperse knowledge; but the heart of the foolish doth not so." Prov. 20:15, "There is gold, and a multitude of rubies; but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel." Prov. 10:20, "The tongue of the just is as choice silver; the heart of the wicked is little worth."

Motive IV. Holy discourse is also most profitable to the speaker himself. Grace increaseth by the exercise. Even in instructing others and opening truth, we are oftentimes more powerfully led up to further truth ourselves, than by solitary studies. For speech doth awaken the intellectual faculty, and keepeth on the thoughts in order, and one truth oft inferreth others, to a thus excited and prepared mind. And the tongue hath a power of moving on our hearts; when we blow the fire to warm another, both the exercise and the fire warm ourselves: it kindleth the flames of holy love in us, to declare the praise of God to others; it increaseth a hatred of sin in us, to open its odiousness to others. We starve ourselves, when we starve the souls which we should cherish.

Motive V. Holy and heavenly discourse is the most delectable. I mean in its own aptitude, and to a mind that is not diseased by corruption. That which is most great, and good, and necessary, is most

delectable. What should best please us, but that which is best for us? and best for others? and best in itself? The excellency of the subject maketh it delightful! And so doth the exercise of our graces upon it: and serious conference doth help down the truth into our hearts, where it is most sweet. Besides that nature and charity make it pleasant to do good to others. It can be nothing better than a subversion of the appetite by carnality and wickedness, that maketh any one think idle jests, or tales, or plays, to be more pleasant than spiritual, heavenly conference; and the talking of riches, or sports, or lusts, to be sweeter than to talk of God, and Christ, and grace, and glory. A holy mind hath a continual feast in itself in meditating on these things, and the communicating of such thoughts to others, is a more common, and so a more pleasant feast.

Motive VI. Our faithfulness to God obligeth us to speak his praise, and to promote his truth, and plead his cause against iniquity. Hath he given us tongues to magnify his name, and set before us the admirable frame of all the world, to declare his glory in? And shall we be backward to so sweet and great a work? How precious and useful is all his holy word! What light, and life, and comfort may it cause! And shall we bury it in silence? What company can we come into almost, where either the barefaced committing of sin, or the defending of it, or the opposition of truth or godliness, or the frigidity of men's hearts towards God, and supine neglect of holy things, do not call to us, if we are the servants of God, to take his part; and if we are the children of light, to bear our testimony against the darkness of the world; and if we love God, and truth, and the souls of men, to show it by our prudent, seasonable speech? Is he true to God, and to his cause, that will not open his mouth to speak for him?

Motive VII. And how precious a thing is an immortal soul, and therefore not to be neglected! Did Christ think souls to be worth his mediation, by such strange condescension, even to a shameful death? Did he think them worth his coming into flesh to be their teacher? And will you not think them worth the speaking to?

Motive VIII. See also the greatness of your sin, in the negligence of unfaithful ministers. It is easy to see the odiousness of their sin, who preach not the gospel, or do no more than by an hour's dry and dead discourse, shift off the serious work which they should do, and think they may be excused from all personal oversight and helping of the people's

souls all the week after. And why should you not perceive that a dumb, private Christian is also to be condemned, as well as a dumb minister? Is not profitable conference your duty, as well as profitable preaching is his? How many persons condemn themselves, while they speak against unfaithful pastors! Being themselves as unfaithful to families and neighbours, as the other are to the flock!

Motive IX. And consider how the cheapness of the means, doth aggravate the sin of your neglect, and show much unmercifulness to souls. Words cost you little; indeed alone, without the company of good works, they are too cheap for God to accept of. But if a hypocrite may bring so cheap a sacrifice, who is rejected, what doth he deserve that thinketh it too dear? What will that man do for God, or for his neighbour's soul, who will not open his mouth to speak for them? He seemeth to have less love than that man in hell, Luke 16, who would so fain have had a messenger sent from another world, to have warned his brethren, and saved them from that place of torment.

Motive X. Your fruitful conference is a needful help to the ministerial work. When the preacher hath publicly delivered the word of God to the assembly, if you would so far second him, as in your daily converse to set it home on the hearts of those that you have opportunity to discourse with, how great an assistance would it be to his success! Though he must teach them publicly, and from house to house, Acts 20:20, yet is it not possible for him to be so frequent and familiar in daily conference with all the ignorant of the place, as those that are still with them may be. You are many, and he is but one, and can be but in one place at once. Your business bringeth you into their company, when he cannot be there. O happy is that minister who hath such a people, who will daily preach over the matter of his public sermons in their private conference with one another! Many hands make quick work. This would most effectually prevail against the powers of darkness, and cast out Satan from multitudes of miserable souls.

Motive XI. Yea, when ministers are absent, through scarcity, persecution, or unfaithfulness and negligence, the people's holy, profitable conference would do much towards the supplying of that need. There have few places and ages of the world been so happy, but that learned, able, faithful pastors have been so few, that we had need to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send forth more. And it is nothing unusual to have

those few silenced or hindered from the preaching of the gospel, by the factions or the malignity of the world! And it is yet more common to have ignorant or ungodly persons in that office, who betray the people's souls by their usurpation, impiety, or slothfulness. But if in all such poverty, the people that fear God would do their part in private conference, it would be an excellent supply. Ministers may be silenced from public preaching, when you cannot be silenced from profitable discourse.

Motive XII. It is a duty that hath many great advantages for success. 1. You may choose your season; if one time be not fit, you may take another. 2 You may choose the person, whom you find to have the greatest necessity or capacity, and where your labour is likeliest to take. 3. You may choose your subject, and speak of that which you find most suitable. There is no restraint nor imposition upon you, to hinder your liberty in this. 4. You may choose your arguments by which you would enforce it. 5. The speaking and listening of conversation keeps your hearers attentive, and carrieth them on along with you as you go. And it maketh the application much more easy, by their nearness and the familiarity of the discourse; when sermons are usually heard but as an insignificant sound, or words of course. 6. You may at your pleasure go back and repeat those things which the hearer doth not understand, or doth forget; which a preacher in the pulpit cannot do without the censure of the more attentive listeners. 7. You may perceive by the answers of them whom you speak to, what particulars you need most to insist on, and what objections you should most carefully resolve; and when you have satisfied them, and may proceed. All which it is hard for a minister to do in public preaching; and is it not a great sin to neglect such an advantageous duty?

Motive XIII. And it should somewhat encourage you to it, that it is an unquestionable duty, when many other are brought into controversy. Ministers preach under the regulation of human laws and canons, and it is a great controversy with many, whether they shall preach, when they are silenced or forbidden by their superiors; but whether you may speak for God and for men's salvation in your familiar conference, no man questioneth, nor doth any law forbid it.

Motive XIV. Hath not the fruitful conference of others, in the days of your ignorance, done good to you? Have you not been instructed, convinced, persuaded, and comforted by it? What had become of you, if

all men had let you alone, and passed you by, and left you to yourselves? And doth not justice require that you do good to others, as others have done to you, in the use of such a tried means?

Motive XV. Consider how forward the devil's servants are to plead his cause! How readily and fiercely will an ignorant, drunken sot pour out his reproaches and scorns against religion! and speak evil of the things which he never understood! How zealously will a papist, or heretic, or schismatic, promote the interest of his sect, and labour to proselyte others to his party! And shall we be less zealous and serviceable for Christ, than the devil's servants are for him? And do less to save souls, than they will do to damn them?

Motive XVI. Nay, in the time of your sin and ignorance, if you have not spoken against religion, nor taught others to curse, or swear, or speak in ribald, filthy language, yet, at least, you have spent many an hour in idle, fruitless talk? And doth not this now oblige you to show your repentance by more fruitful conference? Will you since your conversion speak as unprofitably as you did before?

Motive XVII. Holy conference will prevent the guilt of foolish, idle talk. Men will not be long silent, but will talk of somewhat, and if they have not profitable things to talk of, they will prate of vanity. All the foolish chat, and frothy jests, and scurrilous ribaldry, and envious backbiting, which taketh up men's time, and poisoneth the hearers, is caused by their lack of edifying discourse, which should keep it out. The most luxuriant wits and tongues will have most weeds, if they be not cultivated and taught to bear a better crop.

Motive XVIII. Your tongues will be instrumental to public good or public hurt. When filthy, vain, and impious language is grown common, it will bring down common plagues and judgments! And if you cross not the custom, you seem to be consenters, and harden men in their sin. But holy conference may, at least, show that some partake not of the evil, and may free them from the plague, if they prevail not with others so far as to prevent it.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I

make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him," Mal. 3:16, 17.

Motive XIX. Consider what great necessity there is every where of fruitful, edifying speech. 1. In the multitude of the ignorant; and the greatness of their ignorance. 2. The numbers of the sensual and obstinate. 3. The power of blindness, and of every sin: what root it hath taken in the most of men. 4. The multitude of baits which are every where before them. 5. The subtilty of Satan and his instruments in tempting. 6. The weakness and unconstancy of man, that hath need of constant solicitation. 7. The lack of holy, faithful pastors, which maketh private men's diligence the more necessary. And in such necessity to shut lip our mouths, is to shut up the bowels of our compassion, when we see our brother's need; and how then doth the love of God dwell in us? 1 John 3:17. To withhold our exhortation, is as the withholding of corn from the poor in a time of famine, which procureth a curse, Prov. 11:26. And though in this case men are insensible of their need, and take it not ill to be passed by, yet Christ that died for them will take it ill.

Motive XX. Lastly, Consider how short a time you are like to speak; and how long you must be silent. Death will quickly stop your breath, and lay you in the dark, and tell you that all your opportunities are at an end. Speak now, for you have not long to speak. Your neighbours' lives are hastening to an end, and so are yours; they are dying and must hear no more, till they hear their doom, and you are dying and must speak no more; and they will be lost for ever if they have not help: pity them then, and call on them to foresee the final day; warn them now, for it must be now or never: there is no instructing and admonishing them in the grave. Those skulls which you see cast up; had once tongues which should have praised their Creator and Redeemer, and have helped to save each other's souls; but now they are tongueless. It is a great grief to us that are now here silenced, that we used not our ministry more laboriously and zealously while we had time. And will it not be so with you, when death shall silence you, that you spake not for God while you had a tongue to speak?

Let all these considerations stir up all that God hath taught a holy language, to use it for their Master's service while they may, and to repent of sinful silence.

Tit. 2 Directions for Christian Conference and Edifying Speech.

Direct. I. The most necessary direction for a fruitful tongue is to get a well-furnished mind, and a holy heart, and to walk with God in holiness yourselves: for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak. That which you are fullest of, is readiest to come forth. 1. Spare for no study or labour to get understanding in the things of God: it is a weariness to hear men talk foolishly of any thing, but no where so much as about divine and heavenly things. A wise Christian instructed to the kingdom of God, hath a treasury in his mind, out of which he can bring forth things new and old, Matt. 13:52. "Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge," Prov. 14:7. 2. Get all that holiness in yourselves, to which you would persuade another. There is a strange communicating power in the course of nature, for every thing to produce its like. Learning and good utterance is very helpful; but it is holiness that is aptest to beget holiness in others. Words which proceed from the love of God, and a truly heavenly mind, do most powerfully tend to breed in others that love of God and heavenly-mindedness. 3. Live in the practice of that which you would draw your neighbour to practice. A man that cometh warm from holy meditation, or fervent prayer, doth bring upon his heart a fullness of matter, and an earnest desire, and a fitness to communicate that good to others, which he himself hath felt.

Direct. II. Especially see that you soundly believe yourselves what you are to speak to others. He that hath secret infidelity at his heart, and is himself unsatisfied whether there be a heaven and hell, and whether sin be so bad and holiness so necessary as the Scripture speaks, will speak but heartlessly of them to another; but if we believe these things, as if we saw them with our eyes, how heartily shall we discourse of them!

Direct. III. Keep a compassionate sense of the misery of ignorant, ungodly, impenitent souls. Think what a miserable bondage of darkness and sensuality they are in; and that it is light that must recover them: think oft how quickly they must die, and what an appearance they must make before the Lord, and how miserable they must be for ever, if now they be not convinced and sanctified! And sure this will stir up your bowels to pity them, and make you speak.

Direct. IV. Subdue foolish shame or bashfulness, and get a holy fortitude of mind. Remember what a sin it is to be ashamed of such a Master, and such a cause and work, which all would be glad to own at last; and that when the wicked are not ashamed of the service of the devil, and the basest works. And remember that threatening, "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels," Mark 8:38.

Direct. V. Be always furnished with those particular truths which may be most useful in this service. Study to do your work (in your degree) as ministers study to do theirs; who are not contented with the habitual furniture of their minds, but they also make particular preparations for their particular work. If you are to go into the field to your labour, you will take those tools with you by which it must be done: so do when you go abroad among any that you may do good to, and be not unfurnished for edifying discourse.

Direct. VI. Speak most of the greatest things, (the folly of sin, the vanity of the world, the certainty and nearness of death and judgment, the overwhelming weight of eternity, the necessity of holiness, the work of redemption, &c.) and choose not the smaller matters of religion to spend your time upon (unless upon some special reason). Among good men that will not lose their time on vanity, the devil too oft prevaileth, to make them lose it by such religious conference, as is little to edification, that greater matters may be thereby thrust out; such as Paul calleth "Vain janglings, and doting about questions which engender strife, and not godly edifying:" as about their several opinions or parties, or comparing one preacher or person with another, or such things as tend but little to make the hearers more wise, or holy, or heavenly.

Direct. VII. Suit all your discourse to the quality of your auditors. That which is best in itself, may not be best for every hearer. You must vary both your subject and manner of discourse, 1. According to the variety of men's knowledge: the wise and the foolish must not be spoken to alike. 2. According to the variety of their moral qualities: one may be very pious, and another weak in grace, and another only teachable and tractable, and another wicked and impenitent, and another obstinate and scornful. These must not be talked to with the same manner of discourse. 3. According to the variety of particular sins which they are inclined to;

which in some is pride, in some sensuality, lust, or idleness, in some covetousness, and in some an erroneous zeal against the church and cause of Christ. Every wise physician will vary his remedies, not only according to the kind of the disease, but according to its various accidents, and the complexion also of the patient.

Direct. VIII. Be sure to do most where you have most authority and obligation. He that will neglect and slight his family, relations, children, and servants, who are under him, and always with him, and yet be zealous for the conversion of strangers, doth reveal much hypocrisy, and showeth, that it is something else than the love of souls, or sense of duty, which carrieth him on.

Direct IX. Never speak of holy things, but with the greatest reverence and seriousness you can. The manner as well as the matter is needful to the effect. To talk of sin and conversion, of God and eternity, in a common, running, careless manner, as you speak of the men, and the matters of the world, is much worse than silence, and tendeth but to debauch the hearers, and bring them to a contempt of God and holiness. I remember myself, that when I was young, I had sometime the company of one ancient godly minister, who was of weaker parts than many others, but yet did profit me more than most; because he would never in prayer or conference speak of God, or the life to come, but with such marvelous seriousness and reverence, as if he had seen the majesty and glory which he talked of.

Direct. X. Take heed of inconsiderate, imprudent passages, which may mar all the rest, and give malignant auditors advantage of contempt and scorn. Many honest Christians, through their ignorance, thus greatly wrong the cause they manage (I would I might not say, many ministers). Too few words is not so bad, as one such imprudent, foolish word too much.

Direct. XI. Condescend to the weak, and bear with their infirmity. If they give you foolish answers, be not angry and impatient with them; yea, or if they perversely cavil and contradict. "For the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing opposers, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth," 2 Tim. 2:24, 25. He is a

foolish physician that cannot bear the words of an excited or delirious patient.

Direct. XII. When you are among those that can teach you, be not so forward to teach as to learn. Be not eager to vent what you have to say, but desirous to hear what your betters have to say. Questions in such a case should be most of your part: it requireth great skill and diligence to draw that out of others, which may profit you; and be not impatient if they cross your opinions, or open your ignorance. Yea, those that you can teach in other things, yet in some things may be able to add much to your knowledge.

Tit. 3. Special Directions for Reproof and Exhortation for the good of others.

This duty is so great, that Satan hindereth it with all his power, and so hard, that most men quite omit it (unless an angry reproach may go for Christian exhortation) and some spoil it in the management; and some proud, censorious persons mistake the exercise of their pride and passion, for the exercise of a charitable Christian duty; and seem to be more sensible of their neighbour's sin and misery, than of their own. Therefore that you miscarry not in so needful a work, I shall add these following directions.

Direct. I. Be sure first that your reproof have a right end; and then let the manner be suited to that end. If it be to convince and convert a soul, it must be done in a manner likely to prevail; if it be only to bear down the argument of a deceiver, to preserve the standers-by, to vindicate the honour of God and godliness, and to dishonour sin, and to disgrace an obstinate factor for the devil, then another course is fit. Therefore resolve first, by the quality of the cause and person, what must be your end.

Direct. II. Be sure that you reprove not that as a sin, which is no sin; either by mistaking the law or the fact. To make duties and sins of our own opinions and inventions, and then to lay out our zeal on these, and censure or reprove all that think not as hardly of such things as we; this is to make ourselves the objects of the hearers' pity; and not to exercise just

pity towards others! Such reproofs deserve reproof; for they reveal great ignorance, and pride, and self-conceitedness, and very much harden sinners in their way; and make them think that all reproof is but the vanity of fantastical hypocrites. In some cases with a child, or servant, or private friend, or for prevention, we may speak of faults upon hearsay or suspicion; but it must be as of things uncertain, and as a warning rather than a reproof. In ordinary reproof, you must understand the case before you speak; it is a shame to say after, I thought it had been otherwise. Such an erroneous reproof is worse than none.

Direct. III. Choose not the smallest sins to reprove, nor the smallest duties to exhort them to. For that will make them think that all your zeal is taken up with little matters, and that there is no great necessity of regarding you; and conscience will be but little moved by your speech: when greater things will greatly and more easily affect men.

Direct. IV. Stop not (with unregenerate men) in the mention of particular sins or duties; but make use of particulars to convince them of a state of sin and misery. It is easy to convince a man that he is a sinner; and when that is done, he is never the more humbled or converted: for he will tell you, that all are sinners; and therefore he hopeth to speed as well as you. But you must make him discern his sinful state, and show him the difference between a penitent sinner, and an impenitent; a converted sinner, and an unconverted; a justified, pardoned sinner, and an unjustified, unpardoned one; or else you will do him but little good.

Direct. V. Suit the manner of your reproof to the quality of the person. It is seldom that a parent, master, or superior, must be reproved by a private inferior; and when it is done, it must be done with great submission and respect. An angry, peevish person must be dealt with tenderly, as you handle thorns; but a duller, sottish person, must be more earnestly and warmly dealt with. So also a greater sin must be roughly handled, or with greater detestation, than a less.

Direct. VI. Take a fit season. Not when a man is in drink, or passion, or among others where the disgrace will vex and harden him; hut in secret between him and you (if his conversion be your end).

Direct. VII. Do all in love and tender pity. If you convince not the hearer that you do it in unfeigned love, you must (usually) expect to lose your labour; because you make not advantage of his self-love, to promote

your exhortations: therefore the exhorting way should be more frequent than the reproofing way; for reproof disgraceth and exasperateth, when the same thing contrived into an exhortation may prevail.(2 Thess. 3:15; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:25, 1 Thess. 5:13.)

Direct. VIII. Therefore be as much or more in showing the good which you would draw them to, as the evil which you would turn them from. For they are never savingly converted, till they are won to the love of God and holiness; therefore the opening of the riches of the gospel, and the love of God, and the joys of heaven, must be the greatest part of your treaty with a sinner.

Direct. IX. And labour so to help him to a true understanding of the nature of religion, that he may perceive that it is not only a necessary but a pleasant thing. All love delights: it is the slander and misrepresentation of godliness by the devil, the world, and the flesh, which maketh mistaken sinners shun it. The way to convert them, and win their hearts to it, is to make them know how good and pleasant it is, and to confute those calumnies.

Direct. X. Yet always insert the remembrance of death, and judgment, and hell. For the drowsy mind hath need to be awakened; and love worketh best when fear subserveth it. It is hard to procure a serious audience and consideration of things from hardened hearts, if the sight of death and hell do not help to make them serious. Danger which must be escaped, must be known and thought on. These things put weight and power into your speech.

Direct. XI. Do all as with divine authority; and therefore have ready some plain texts of Scripture for the duty and against the sin you speak of. (Col. 3:16.) Show them where God himself hath said it.

Direct. XII. Seasonable expostulations, putting themselves to judge themselves in their answer, hath a convincing and engaging force. As when you show them Scripture, ask them, Is not this the word of God? Do you not believe that it is true? Do you think he that wrote this, knoweth not better than you or I? &c.

Direct. XIII. Put them on speedy practice, and prudently engage them to it by their promise. As if you speak to a drunkard, draw him to promise you to come no more (at least, of so long a time) into an alehouse; or not drink ale or wine but by the consent of his wife, or some

sober, household friend, who may watch over him. Engage the voluptuous, the unchaste, and gamester, to forsake the company which insnares them. Engage the ungodly to read the Scripture, to frequent good company, to pray morning and night (with a book or without, as they are best able). Their promise may bring them to such a present change of practice, as may prepare for more.

Direct. XIV. If you know any near you, who are much fitter than yourselves, and liker to prevail, procure them to attempt that which you cannot do successfully. (Ezek. 33,34.; Gal. 6:1; Tit. 2:4.) At least when sinners perceive that it is not only one man's opinion, it may somewhat move them to reverence the reproof.

Direct. XV. Put some good book into their hands, which is fitted to the work which you would have done. And get them to promise you seriously to read it over, and consider it... Such books may speak more pertinently than you can; and be as constant food to their sober thoughts, and so may further what you have begun.

Direct. XVI. When you cannot speak, or where your speaking prevaieth not, mourn for them; and earnestly pray for their recovery. (Ezek. 9:4; 2 Pet. 2:7,8.) A sad countenance of Nehemiah remembered Artaxerxes of his duty. A sigh or a tear for a miserable sinner, may move his heart, when exhortation will not. He hath a heart of stone, who will have no sense of his condition, when he seeth another weeping for him.

Quest. But is it always a duty to reprove or exhort a sinner? How shall I know when it is my duty, and when it is not?

Answer. It is no duty in any of these cases following:

1. In general, When you have sufficient reason to judge, that it will do more harm than good, and will not attain its proper end; for God hath not appointed us to do hurt under pretense of duty; it is no means which doth cross the end which it should attain. As prayer and preaching may be a sin, when they are like to cross their proper end; so also may reproof be.

2. Therefore it must not be used when it apparently hindereth a greater good. As we may not pray or preach when we should be

quenching a fire in the town, or saving a man's life: so when reproof doth exclude some greater duty or benefit, it is unseasonable, and no duty at that time. Christ alloweth us to forbear the casting of pearls before swine, or giving that which is holy to dogs, because of these two reasons forementioned, It is no means to the contemptuous, and they will turn again and all to rend us.(Prov. 9:7, 8; Matt. 7:6.) Much more, if he be some potent enemy of the church, who will not only rend us, but the church itself, if he be so provoked: reproving him then is not our duty.

3. Particularly, When a man is in a passion or drunk usually it is no season to reprove him.

4. Nor when you are among others, who should not be witnesses of the fault, or the reproof; or whose presence will shame him, and offend him (except it be only the shaming of an incorrigible or malicious sinner which you intend).

5. Nor when you are uncertain of the fact which you would reprove, or uncertain whether it be a sin.

6. Or when you have no witness of it, (though you are privately certain,) with some that will take advantage against you as slanderers, a reproof may be omitted.

7. And when the offenders are so much your superiors, that you are like to have no better success than to be accounted arrogant; a groan or tears is then the best reproof.

8. When you are so utterly unable to manage a reproof, that imprudence or lack of convincing reason, is likely to make it a means of greater hurt than good.

9. When you foresee a more advantageous season, if you delay.

10. When another may be procured to do it with much more advantage, which your doing it may rather hinder.

In all these cases, that may be a sin, which at another time may be a duty.

But still remember, first, That pride, and passion, and slothfulness, is wont to pretend such reasons falsely, upon some slight conjectures, to put by a duty. Secondly, That no man must account another a dog or swine, to excuse him from this duty, without cogent evidence. And it is

not every wrangling opposition, nor reproach and scorn, which will warrant us to give a man up as remediless, and speak to him no more; but only such, 1. As showeth a heart utterly obdurate, after long means. 2. Or will procure more suffering to the reprover, than good to the offender. 3. That when the thing is ordinarily a duty, the reasons of our omission must be clear and sure, before they will excuse us.(Gen. 20:36; Job 13:13; Heb. 13:22; 2 Peter 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:25,26.)

Quest. Must we reprove infidels or heathens? What have we to do to judge them that are without?

Answer. Not to the ends of excommunication, because they are not capable of it, (Deut. 22:1) which is meant by 1 Cor. 5. But we must reprove them, first, in common compassion to their souls. What were the apostles and other preachers sent for, but to call all men from their sins to God? Secondly, And for the defense of truth and godliness, against their words, or ill examples.