

Examples of Unwise Counsel to Awakened Sinners

Asahel Nettleton
(1783-1843)

Asahel Nettleton's feelings were often severely tried by the unwise counsel which some professing Christians were in the habit of giving to awakened sinners. He has been heard to say, that he recognized more evil from this source, than from all the opposition of public enemies of religion. He usually occupied one meeting in considering these misguided directions. A sketch of the address delivered on these occasions is found among his papers, of which the following is an extract.

1. Wait at the pool. You must not be discouraged, for we read of one who waited thirty-eight years. This text is used by way of accommodation. The impotent man was waiting at the pool, not for the pardon of his sins, but to be healed of a bodily disease. We may accommodate passages of Scripture for the purpose of illustrating acknowledged truth; but we must not trace analogies too far. In many respects there is a striking analogy between a depraved heart and a diseased body; but there is one important point in which the analogy does not hold—the one is criminal, the other is merely calamitous.

This use of the passage contradicts many plain declarations of the Bible—particularly all those which enjoin the duty of immediate repentance. Suppose a person should address sinners in this manner: Behold, now is the accepted time! Behold, now is the day of salvation! *But wait at the pool.* Choose ye this day whom ye will serve; *but wait at the pool.* God now commands all men everywhere to repent, *but wait at the pool.* The effect of this direction is, to make the impression on the sinner's mind, that he is not under obligation to obey God immediately; and, of course, it counteracts the influence of every command of God on the sinner's conscience.

The sinner is told that he must not be discouraged, for the impotent man waited thirty-eight years. This, however, is not said. It is said that he had an infirmity thirty-eight years; but it is not said that he had waited a day. Be this, however, as it may, he was not healed by the pool after all, nor is there any evidence that he would have been if he had waited all his life.

2. Be patient and wait God's time. What is the meaning of this direction when given to an awakened sinner?

Be patient! Is the sinner to understand that he is too anxious for the salvation of his soul, and that he ought to wait patiently in his sins till God shall see fit to change his heart?

To tell the anxious sinner to be *patient* without a new heart, is the same as to tell him to dismiss all his anxiety, and to go back to a state of stupidity. Patient in his sins! Rather let him be more and more impatient with himself and with his deplorable condition. Let him tremble in view of a judgment to come, and weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon him.

What is meant when the sinner is directed to wait God's time? Is it meant that God is not now ready to receive the sinner? Is it meant that the sinner is willing to do his part, and that he must wait for God to do His? If so, why not speak plainly, and tell the sinner: I know you are ready and willing to be a Christian, but God is not ready and willing to receive you. But if God is not ready now to receive the returning sinner, what evidence is there that He ever will be ready?

But when is God's time? Do those who direct sinners to wait God's time, mean that it is not their duty to repent and believe till God grants them repentance and faith? Then it never was the duty of those sinners to repent who have gone to destruction, and it never will be. They waited all their lives, and are waiting still, and will wait to all eternity. And it has never yet been the duty of any sinner, who is now impenitent, to repent; and if God should not grant him repentance, it never will be. But this directly contradicts the Scriptures.

The sinner under conviction is distressed with a sense of his obligation to comply with the terms of salvation without delay. And there is no way to relieve him from his distress while impenitent, but to release him from his sense of obligation to repent. To direct him to wait God's time is directly calculated to produce this effect, and to counteract the operations of the divine Spirit. It is to plead the sinner's cause against God.

But is it not hard to distress the sinner by pressing him with his obligations? It is painful, but it is necessary. It is painful to the surgeon to probe to the bottom of a dangerous wound; but it must be done, or the patient will die. If, through false pity, we console the sinner under these circumstances, there is reason to fear that his blood will be required at our hands. If we direct the sinner to wait, we direct him to run the awful hazard of losing his soul.

3. It is sometimes said to the sinner, under deep distress, "Don't despair." This expression frequently produces a bad effect upon the sinner's mind.

It is sometimes the case, that sinners speak of the greatness of their sins and the hopelessness of their condition, on purpose to be flattered and consoled. And when they do not, it is always best to admit that their case is quite as bad as they represent it. It is proper to hold up the fullness of the atonement, and the readiness of God to forgive all who repent. But this the sinner generally does not doubt. The thing that distresses the convicted sinner, is the fear that he never shall repent. From his own experience he has full conviction that it will never be easier to repent than now. His sins are increasing, and his heart is becoming more

and more perverse. God has said, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” He believes it. He despairs of obtaining salvation without repentance; and of this he ought to despair.

4. In every case of clear conviction there is in the mind of the sinner a painful sense of obligation to repent, and a fearful apprehension that he never shall repent. In this state he sometimes inquires: ***Do you think there is any hope in my case? Do you think I ever shall become a Christian?*** This is a most interesting crisis; and a little flattery here may ruin the soul. The proper answer to these inquiries is: “*I do not know. It is altogether uncertain. One thing is certain, however great your sins may be, if you will repent they shall be pardoned; but whether you ever will repent is altogether uncertain. Sinners as anxious as you, and perhaps more so, have returned to stupidity, and their last state has become worse than the first.*” When sinners are in this state of mind their friends are exceedingly prone to flatter them. “*Oh! Don’t despair—be patient—wait God’s time—you will, doubtless, find relief.*” Such language is exceedingly dangerous. Every word takes it for granted that the sinner’s concern for his soul is without foundation. One of two things is true—either such directions are wrong, or the sinner is not under conviction for if he is under real conviction, the Spirit of God is shewing him his true condition. His apprehensions are well founded, and if we attempt to remove these apprehensions, we directly counteract the operations of the Holy Spirit.

The above extract will give the reader some idea of the manner in which Dr. Nettleton was in the habit of dealing with awakened sinners. He did not heal the heart of sinners slightly, nor cry “Peace, peace,” when God had not spoken peace.

[Original title: Injudicious Directions | For more read Asahel Nettleton: Life & Labours by Bennet Tyler & Andrew Bonar.]