

WHAT TO DO WHEN  
THERE IS NO  
FAITHFUL CHURCH  
IN YOUR AREA  
BY  
JOHN KNOX

(Formerly titled: *A Letter of  
wholesome counsel  
addressed to his brethren in  
Scotland, 1556*)

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In the spring of 1556, while Knox was still in Scotland, he received letters from the Church of English exiles at Geneva, inviting him to return and undertake the office of the ministry to which, during his absence, he had been appointed.<sup>1</sup> The state of the affairs in this country was such, that he deemed it advisable to comply with this invitation. When about to leave for a season those among whom he had so assiduously laboured in word and doctrine, he wrote the following *Letter of Counsell*, containing such directions as he considered most suitable in the circumstances in which they were placed, for holding stated meetings for prayer, reading, and religious instruction, while destitute of the privileges of public worship. And, while recommending that their assemblies ought always to be closed as well as opened by prayer, he signified his own readiness to give them his advice by letter, whenever it should be required, on any difficulties which might perplex them in their conferring passages of scripture. “*There is every reason to conclude (says his Biographer) that these directions were punctually complied with; this Letter may therefore be viewed as an important document regarding the state of the Protestant Church in Scotland, previous to the establishment of the Reformation.*”<sup>2</sup> It is dated on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1556.

Although the Protestants in Scotland had hitherto been precluded from making an open profession of truth, or from enjoying the benefit of regular ministrations publicly sanctioned, their position was very similar to that of their bretheren in England during the reign of Queen Mary. “When the learned preachers and ministers,” says Strype “were most of them burnt or fled, and the flocks left destitute, of their faithful pastors, some of the laity, tradesman, or others, indued with parts and some learning, used, in that distress, to read the scriptures to the rest in their meetings, and the letters of the martyrs and prisoners, and other good books; also to pray with them, and exhort them to stand fast, and to establish them in the confession of Christ to the death.”<sup>3</sup> He elsewhere remarks, “The course they took in these sad times, was the same which the Primitive Christians did, when they were under their persecutions, namely, prayers, and tears. They continued to assemble together in the hottest times: and in these assemblies sometimes they only prayed together.”<sup>4</sup>

This Letter, with the running title, “*Watche and pray with diligence,*” was printed at the time, being annexed to the original edition of his “*Exposition of the Sixth Psalm,*” as well as in the republication at London in 1580.<sup>5</sup> It is also contained in Dr. M'Crie's manuscript volume, with this title: “*To his Bretheren in Scotland, efter he had bene quyet amang thame.*”<sup>6</sup> The title in the opposite page forms the concluding portion of the separate title-page to his “*Comfortable Epistle,*” given in facsimile, vol. iii. p. 237.

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1. See “*Brief Discourse,*” &c., supra, p. 51  
3. Strype's *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, vol. iii. p. 364.  
5. See vol iii. pp. 114-116, 238.

2. M'Crie's *Life of Knox*, vol. i. p. 192.  
4. *Ib.* vol. iii. p. 245.  
6. *Ib.* p. 116.

*A most wholesome Counsel how to behave ourselves in the midst of this wicked generation, touching the daily exercise of God's most holy and sacred Word.*

*The Comfort of the Holy Ghost, &c., for Salvation.*

Not so much<sup>1</sup> to instruct you, as to leave with you (dearly beloved Brethren) some testimony of my love, I have thought good to communicate with you, in these few lines my weak counsel, how I would that you should behave yourself in the midst of this wicked generation, touching the exercise of God's most sacred and holy Word, without which,<sup>2</sup> neither shall knowledge increase, godliness appear, nor fervency continue among you. For as the Word of God is the beginning of life spiritual, without which all flesh is dead in God's presence, and the lantern to our feet, without the brightness whereof all the posterity of Adam doth walk in darkness; and as it is the foundation<sup>3</sup> of faith, without which no man understands the good will of God, so it is also the only organ and instrument which God uses to strengthen the weak, to comfort the afflicted, to reduce to mercy by repentance, such as have backslidden, and finally, to preserve and keep the very life of the soul in all assaults and temptations. And therefore,<sup>4</sup> if that you desire your knowledge to be increased, your faith to be confirmed, your conscience to be quieted and comforted, or finally, your soul to be preserved in life, let your exercise be frequent in the law of your Lord God. Despise not that precept which Moses (who by his own experience had learned what comfort lies hidden within the Word of God) gave to the Israelites in these words, "These words which I command thee this day shall be in thy heart, and thou shalt exercise thy children in them. Thou shalt talk of them when thou art at home in thy house, and as thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up; and thou shalt bind them for a sign upon the hand, and they shall be papers of remembrance between thine eyes, and thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and upon thy gates." And Moses, in another place, commandeth them to "remember the law of the Lord God, to do it that it may be well with them, and with their children in the land which the Lord their God shall give them." Meaning, that like as frequent memory and repetition of God's precepts is the means whereby the fear of God, which is the beginning of all wisdom and felicity, is kept recent in mind: So is negligence and oblivion of God's benefits received, the first degree<sup>6</sup> of defection from God.

Now, if the law, by reason of our weakness can work nothing but wrath and anger, was so effectual, that remembered and rehearsed of purpose to do it, it brought to the people a corporal benediction, what shall we say that the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ does work, so that with reverence it be entreated? Saint Paul calls it the sweet odor of life to those that shall receive life, borrowing his analogy of sweet smelling herbs or precious ointments, whose nature is, the more that they be touched or moved, to send forth their odor more pleasant and delectable: Even such dear Bretheren, is the blessed Evangelist of our Lord Jesus; for the more that it be entreated, the more comfortable and

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1. In Ms. M., "Not sa mekill."

3. Ib. "the fundament."

5. In Ms. M., "is the middis."

2. Ib. "without the whilk."

4. Ib. "thairfoir."

6. Ib. "first grie."

pleasant<sup>7</sup> it is to such as do hear, read, or exercise the same. I am not ignorant, that as the Israelites loathed the manna, because that everyday they saw and ate but one thing, so some there be even today, (who will not even be of the worst sort,) that after once reading some parcels of the Scriptures, do commit<sup>8</sup> themselves altogether to profane authors and human lectures,<sup>9</sup> because that the variety of matters therein contained doth bring with it daily delegation, where contrariwise within the simple Scriptures of God the perpetual repetition of one thing is tedious and wearisome. This temptation, I confess, may enter in God's very elect for a time, but impossible it is that therein they continue to the end; for God's election, besides other evident signs, has this ever joined with it, that God's elect are called from ignorance (I speak of those that are come to the years of knowledge) to some taste and feeling of God's mercy, of the which they are never so satisfied in this life, but from time to time they hunger and they thirst too eat the bread that descended from heaven and to drink the water that springs to life everlasting, which they can not do but by the means of Faith and Faith looks to ever to the will of God revealed by the Word, so that Faith hath both her beginning and continuance by the Word of God. And so I say, that impossible it is that God's chosen children can despise or reject the word of their salvation of any longer continuance, neither yet loathe it to the end.

Often it is that God's elect are held in such bondage and difficulties, that they can not have the bread of life broke unto them, neither yet free liberty to exercise themselves in God's holy Word; but then God's dear children do not loath, but most gladly do they covet the food of their souls, then do they accuse their former negligence, then lament they the miserable affliction of their brethren, and then cry and call they in their hearts (and openly where they dare) for free passage of the Gospel. This hunger and thirst doth prove<sup>10</sup> the life of their souls. But if such men, as having liberty to read and exercise themselves in God's Holy Scriptures and yet begin to weary, because from time to time they read but one thing, I ask, Why weary they not also everyday to eat bread? Every day to drink wine? Every day to behold the brightness of the sun? And to use the rest of God's creatures, which every day do keep their own substance, course, and nature? They shall answer, I trust, Because such creatures have a strength, [as often as they are used, to expel hunger, to quench thirst, to restore strength, and ]<sup>11</sup> to preserve your life. O miserable creatures!<sup>12</sup> Who dare attribute more power and strength to<sup>13</sup> the corruptible creatures in nourishing and preserving the mortal body, than to the eternal Word of God in the nourishment of the soul, which is immortal! To reason with their damnable<sup>14</sup> unthankfulness at this present it is not my purpose: But to you dear Brethren, I write my knowledge, and do speak my conscience that so necessary as the use of meat and drink is to the preservation of life corporal, and so necessary as the heat and brightness of the sun is to the quickening of herbs, and to expel darkness; so necessary is also to the life everlasting, and to the illumination and light of the soul, the perpetual meditation, exercise, and use of God's Holy Word.

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7. Ib. "mair puissant"

9. Ib. "humane letters"

11. The words enclosed in brackets are omitted in the original edition, and also in the edition of 1580

13. In the orig. edit, "to is usually printed "too"

8. In Ms. M., "convert" or turn, themselves

10. In Ms. M., "doth argue and prufe"

12. In Ms. M., "wretches"

14. In Ms. M., "abhominable"

And therefore, dear Brethren, if that you look for a life to come, of necessity it is that you exercise yourselves in the book of the Lord your God. Let no day slip or want<sup>15</sup> some comfort received from the mouth of God. Open your ears, and he will speak even pleasant things to your heart. Close not your eyes, but diligently let them behold what portion of substance is left to you within your Father's testament. Let your tongues learn to praise the gracious goodness of Him, whose mercy hath called you from darkness to light, and from death to life. Neither yet may you do this so quietly that you will admit no witness.<sup>16</sup> No, Brethren, you are ordained of God to rule your own houses in his true fear, and according to his Word. Within your houses, I say, in some cases, you are bishops and kings; your wife, children, servants, and family are your bishopric and charge; of you it shall be required how carefully and diligently you have always instructed them in God's true knowledge, how that you have studied in them to plant virtue and repress vice. And therefore, I say, you must make them partakers in reading, exhorting, and in making common prayers, which I would in every house were used once a day at least. But above all things, dear Brethren, study to practice in life that which the Word of God commands, and then be you assured that you shall never hear nor read the same without fruit. And thus much<sup>17</sup> for the exercises within your house.<sup>18</sup>

Considering that Saint Paul calls the congregation “the body of Christ,” whereof everyone of us is a member, teaching us that no member is of sufficiency to sustain and feed itself without the help and support of another; I think it necessary for the conference of Scriptures, assemblies of brethren be had. The order therein to be observed is expressed by S. Paul, and therefore need not I to use many words in that behalf; only willing, that when you convent<sup>19</sup> or come together, which I would were once a week, that your beginning should be from confession of your offenses, and invocation of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus to assist you in all your godly enterprises. And then let some place of Scripture be plainly and distinctly read, so much as shall be thought sufficient for one day or time; which ended, if any brother have exhortation, question, or doubt, let him not fear to speak or move the same, so that he do it with moderation, either to edify or to be edified. And hereof I doubt not but great profit shall shortly ensue; for, first, by hearing, reading, and confessing the Scriptures in the assembly, the whole body of the Scriptures of God shall become familiar, the judgments and spirits of men shall be tried, their patience and modesty shall be known; and, finally, their gifts and utterance shall appear. Multiplication of words, prolixet (convoluted)<sup>20</sup> interpretations, and willfulness in reasoning, is to be avoided at all times, and in all places, but chiefly in the congregation, where nothing ought to be respected except the glory of God, and comfort or edification of brethren.

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15. Ib. “Let na day slip over without sum comfort”

17. Ib. “this mekill”

19. Convener, assemble.

16. In Ms. M., “witnessis”

18. Ib. “houssis”

20. Reformedontheweb's attempt at defining “prolixet”

If anything occur within the text, or else arise in reasoning, while your judgments cannot resolve or capacities apprehend, let the same be noted and put in writing before you dismiss the congregation, that when God shall offer unto you an interpreter, your doubts being noted and known, may have the more expedite resolution; or else that when you shall have occasion to write to such as with whom you would communicate your judgments, your letters may signify and declare your unceasing desire that ye have of God and of his true religion, and they, I doubt not, according to their talents, will endeavor and bestow their faithful labors to satisfy your godly intentions. Of myself I will speak as I think; I will more gladly spend XV. hours in communicating my judgments with you, in explaining as God pleases to open to me any place of Scripture, then half a hour in any matter beside.

Further more, I would, in reading the Scripture you should join some books of the Old and some of the New Testament together, as Genesis and one of the Evangelists, Exodus with another, and so forth, ever ending such books as you begin (as the time will suffer,) for it shall greatly comfort you to hear that harmony and well tuned song of the Holy Spirit speaking in our fathers from the beginning. It shall confirm you in these dangerous and perilous days to behold the face of Christ Jesus his loving spouse and church,<sup>21</sup> from Abel to himself, and from himself to your day, in all ages to be one. Be frequent in the Prophets and in the Epistles of Saint Paul, for the multitude of matters, most comfortable, therein contained, requires exercise and a good memory. Like as your assemblies ought to begin with confession and invocation of God's Holy Spirit, so would I that they were finished with<sup>22</sup> thanksgiving and common prayers for princes, rulers, and magistrates, for the liberty and free passage of Christ's Envagell, (Gospel)<sup>23</sup> for the comfort and deliverance of our afflicted brethren in all places now persecuted, but most cruelly within the realm of France and England; and for such other things as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus shall teach unto you to be profitable, either to yourselves, or to your brethren wherever they may be.

If thus (or better) I shall hear that you exercise yourselves, dear Brethren, then will I praise God for your great obedience, as for them that have not only received the word of grace with gladness, but that also, with care and diligence, do keep the same as a treasure and jewel most precious. And because that I cannot suspect, that you will do the contrary at this present, I will use no threatening, for my good hope is, that you shall walk as the sons of light in the midst of this wicked generation; that you shall be as stars in the night season, who yet are not changed into darkness; that you shall be [as] wheat among the cockle,<sup>24</sup> and yet, that you shall not change your nature which you have received by grace, through the fellowship and participation which we have with the Lord Jesus in his body and blood. And finally, that you shall be of the number of the prudent virgins, daily renewing your lamps with oil, as they that

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21. In Ms. M., "kirk"

23. Definition of "Envagell" added by Reformedontheweb

22. Ib. "that they were never finished without thanksgiving

24. Ib. "kokill;" cockle, a weed that grows among corn

patiently do abide the glorious appearance and coming of the Lord Jesus; whose omnipotent Spirit rule and instruct, illuminate and comfort your hearts and minds, in all assaults now and ever. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus rest with you.

Remember my weakness in your daily prayers. The 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1556.<sup>25</sup>

Your brother unfeigned,

**John Knox**

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25. Dr M'Crie has printed this letter in the Appendix to his life of Knox, but by some oversight in the later editions, he gives the date, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1557. In Ms. M; the date is distinctly

1556. The old printed edition ends thus: "7. Julii. 1.5.5.6.