

Eldridge (Jos.)

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN NORFOLK, CONN.,

AT THE

FUNERAL OF

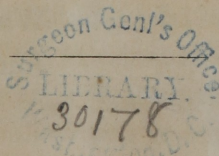
BENJAMIN WELCH, M.D.,

DECEMBER 21, 1849.

BY

JOSEPH ELDRIDGE,

PASTOR OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.



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NORFOLK, DEC. 21, 1849.

REV. J. ELDRIDGE :

Dear Sir,—On behalf of the family of the late Benjamin Welch, M. D., we thank you for the Sermon preached at his funeral, and ask the favor of a copy for publication, for the benefit, not only of those present, but also of a large circle of relatives and friends, at a distance, who could not be present on the occasion. We do not hesitate, also, personally to acknowledge our high gratification with the sentiments of the discourse, and express our earnest desire that you will comply with this request.

Most respectfully yours,

ASA G. WELCH,

BENJ. WELCH, JR,

JAMES WELCH,

WM. W. WELCH,

JOHN H. WELCH.

DISCOURSE.

“LUKE, THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN.”—*Col. iv., 14.*

THE man here referred to and described as the beloved physician, was the writer of the Gospel that bears his name, and also of the Acts of the Apostles. He had accompanied Paul in a part of those journeyings narrated in the Acts, and was of course well known to the Apostle who makes such honorable mention of him. The commendatory epithet is applied to him as physician, as if to intimate that it was in the discharge of the duties of that profession that his good qualities especially shone forth.

Our Lord, who came into this sinful and sorrowful world with special reference to the redemption of the soul, was not indifferent to the diseases and sufferings of the body. He volunteered to act the part of a mighty physician. His miracles were, most of them, of this character, and secured for him the gratitude and affections of multitudes who had experienced his healing power. The Missionary of the Cross finds skill in the healing art a ready passport to the attention and regard of all classes in heathen nations.

In all lands and in every community, a competent and faithful physician is justly entitled to a high place in public esteem and consideration.

The occasion that has gathered us together here—

the decease of an aged and beloved physician,—suggests my theme, and renders it suitable and proper that I should attempt to trace the sentiments which now fill our hearts to their source; that I should endeavor to discover and set forth the grounds of that esteem and affection which we feel to be due to an able and faithful physician.

Why is one who occupies the position which our deceased friend filled in this community for half a century, and who performs the services which he rendered so long and so successfully, deserving general esteem and regard? In answering this question, I observe,

1st.—The medical profession demands qualifications—intellectual and moral—that entitle their possessor to respect, in whatever sphere he may be called to act. It requires in addition to general education, intimate acquaintance with several departments of science.

The physician is concerned with the human body, that most complicated, delicate, and beautiful specimen of Divine mechanism, at once the habitation and instrument of the immortal mind. He must thoroughly understand its structure, every organ, its place and function; he must be familiar with the arrangement of the parts, with the separate action of each, and the combined operation of the whole. But the human frame is not simply a vital organization. It is, as I have said, the abode of the indwelling spirit—and so intimately has the Creator blended together matter and mind in man, that the sympathy between them, and their mutual action upon each other for

good or evil, is very important, and cannot be overlooked, or with safety disregarded by him, who seeks the health of either.

But the medical student has acquired but a part, a small part of his lesson in this department, when he has familiarized himself with the formation of the body, and its processes in health. Another and broad field opens before him—that which embraces all the ills that flesh is heir to. Disease in its thousand forms—disease, functional and organic—with its origin, symptoms, and effects, must be investigated. The extent of this branch of inquiry will be more easily conceived, if we recall the picture which, in *Paradise Lost*, the angel Michael presented to Adam in vision.

“ Immediately a place
 Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark ;
 A Lazar-house it seemed ; wherein were laid
 Numbers of all diseased ; all maladies
 Of ghastly spasm, or racking torture, qualms
 Of heart-sick agony, all feverous kinds,
 Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs,
 Intestine stone and ulcer, colic pangs,
 Demoniac phrenzy, moping melancholy
 And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,
 Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,
 Dropsies, and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.”

The master in the healing art must have studied all these forms of disease ; and then to furnish himself with means of combating these maladies, he must have learned from chemistry the composition and properties of the various substances of the earth, and from botany and experiment the medical virtues of all plants. But when all has been acquired that books can teach, and lectures can impart, then there is need

of intellectual habits and qualities of a peculiar order, or this mass of information will avail but little toward the formation of an accomplished medical man.

To distinguish between cases that resemble each other, and are nevertheless different, demanding different treatment; to detect those slight indications, the neglect of which leads to mistakes and dangerous results; to make all needful allowance for those circumstances that modify disease, such as difference of age, constitution, and previous habits; in short, to meet the unavoidable exigencies of his profession, requires of the physician habits of the closest observation, and of the nicest discrimination. He must be always cautious, and yet not seldom he must be bold. The life of a patient may be trembling in the balance; dangers may beset the case on every hand; it may be apparent to the physician, there is but little hope from any course of procedure, and that there is none whatever unless some decisive step be immediately taken that will throw upon him a weighty responsibility. To meet such responsibility, with promptness and self-possession, requires the highest species of moral courage.

To these intellectual endowments and attainments, so necessary to the medical practitioner, there need to be added cheerfulness of disposition, and kindness of heart, and yet kindness that is under the control of firmness. He must be, and seem to be, reluctant to give pain; nevertheless, this feeling must not degenerate into weakness. While yielding so far as fidelity will allow him to do so, he must possess and manifest decision where it is required; must show that if his

services are desired, his prescriptions must be followed.

Integrity and purity of character are indispensable. The occasions when medical advice and assistance are needed, are often the most delicate and confidential imaginable. To think of introducing into the sacredness of our families, for such purposes, an unprincipled and foul-minded man, is horrible.

Piety also is a most desirable qualification in the physician. The scenes in which he mingles are those where, if ever, the light and consolations of religion are needed. To the patient, and to all right-minded friends, it must be painful to have a sneerer or scoffer around the couch of sickness and death. It would be an embarrassment to all religious conversation, to all devotional exercises. The presence, on the other hand, of a medical man known to be a Christian, or a respecter of religion, imposes no restraint. The Christian physician might feel prompted also, on occasions, in the absence of the clergyman and Christian friends, to speak a seasonable word to his patient of the great Physician.

It was formerly said, with how much truth I am not able to decide, that infidelity was common in this profession. It is impossible to believe that there is anything in the study or practice of the healing art, that tends to such a result. The structure of the body has been generally referred to, as exhibiting in its organization abundant evidence of the most obvious and admirable contrivances, and thus furnishing the strongest proof of the existence, the wisdom, and skill of Him who is the author of our bodies. I am

confident that, at the present time, the profession is not liable to the reproach referred to above. Certain I am, that so far as my acquaintance has extended, the proportion of sincere Christians is as large in the medical profession as in any class of the community.

These traits of character, these attainments in knowledge, these moral qualities, that go to constitute an able and accomplished physician, are in their own nature estimable, and fail not to secure for their possessor consideration and influence in whatever sphere he may act.

My next ground of the claim of a competent and faithful physician to general esteem, is found in the services which he renders to the community.

Those services are, in their aim and object, most important. Are life and health and freedom from pain desirable? Such questions carry their own answer with them. The very object of the healing art is to prolong life, to restore health, and to relieve suffering. His assistance extends beyond the body, in some cases, when, through its morbid action, it impedes the operations of the mind. The sane and rational exercise of the intellectual faculties is interrupted, and man, cast down from his high place, becomes the prey of moping melancholy, or of furious madness. Such are often restored to themselves, to their friends, to society, and the world, through the skill and kindness of the experienced physician. Surely, then, the services which the profession renders to the community are in their aim and object of the highest importance.

Then, in the next place, these services are such as necessarily impose upon him severe exertions, bodily

and mental, such as subject him to many privations, and much hardship. He must unavoidably be irregular with respect to food and sleep; he has no command of his time, is subject to everybody's call; when summoned, he must go, whether fresh or weary, whether it be night or day; he must go, whatever the state of the roads or of the weather. He cannot be excused from rising from his bed to-night, after having just comfortably deposited himself in it, because he entered no bed last night, nor, it may be, the night previous. With the most distressing and painful scenes he must be daily conversant; he must pass large portions of time in sick rooms, discharging disagreeable offices; must be familiar with wounds and diseases, with the sufferings of the sick, and the mortal agony of the dying.

Then, in the third place, the services of the physician are many of them unrequited, and some of them such as cannot be requited.

He is expected to be no respecter of persons; he is every man's servant; he is commanded as really by those who have no means of compensating him, as by those of the amplest resources. After much reflection upon the subject, I am settled in the conviction, that more gratuitous labor is performed by physicians than by any other class in community. It has come to be a sort of common law, that they must do it. If they should decline visiting a sick family on account of its poverty and inability to pay for the service, many would hold up their hands in astonishment and horror, who themselves would not render the slightest assistance in the very same case. It would be some

relief if physicians were sent for only when they were needed, by those who have no power or expectation of making any return. The matter of fact very often is, that they find, after subjecting themselves to great inconvenience to meet such a call, that there was no need of haste—indeed, no need of their aid at all.

Even those who have the ability and intention to pay their other debts, are often content to suffer the honest demands of their medical attendant to run along indefinitely. The per centage of unrequited labor performed by this profession is very large. Why should it be so? Their time, their strength, and their skill are their own. Nevertheless, much of their time, strength, and skill are given away.

Then there is much in their services which cannot be requited, for which money is no adequate remuneration. For the weary miles they travel, for the time spent with the sick, for the sacrifice of sleep and physical comfort, they may, perhaps, be paid—pecuniary compensation may possibly cancel claims for such services: but what shall we say of their frequent solicitude for the sick in critical cases; their overwhelming anxiety when precious and valuable lives hang on their decisions? When, in the struggle with disease, they find their efforts baffled, what shall we say of this wear and tear of sensibility and feeling? Will a few dollars and cents cancel such debts? They are not cancelled—they never can be.

But the usefulness and influence of the able and skilful physician is not limited to the line of his profession, important and peculiar as are the services rendered by him to the community in that capacity.

Besides being a professional man, he is, in all respects, a member of society—a citizen—and, as such, fitted to act an important part. He will naturally be a friend of education. His mind has been liberalized by culture and enriched by science; he values knowledge, and will render prompt and efficient aid in all efforts to promote, and extend, and improve the means of acquiring it. This is not matter of speculation; it is true as a matter of fact, that in our towns generally, no more steady and liberal patrons of education are to be found, than are the members of the medical profession.

Then the able physician is a friend of order. He is too familiar with the evils of quackery and empiricism in his own department, to have any partialities for it in any other. Although conservative in his feelings, he is no bigot in his attachment to the past, no enemy to genuine progress and reform. In that great reform on the subject of temperance, the influence of medical gentlemen has been immense, and on the right side. They were early friends of the cause.

On the records of the North Consociation of this county, I recently noticed the following entry, dated April 21, 1829 :—

A communication being received from the Medical Society of Litchfield county, soliciting our co-operation with them in the formation of a County Temperance Society, it was unanimously resolved, That we cordially approve of the proposal of the medical society, and that a committee be raised to co-operate with the committee of the aforesaid society, and with others friendly to the object, in carrying

the proposal into effect. With scarcely an exception, physicians have given the weight of their professional opinion, and of their personal influence, in aid of the enterprise. Who has not been thrilled by those delineations of the effect of alcohol upon the human stomach, prepared by Dr. Sewall? Indeed, the cause is much indebted to the profession. In this connection it is not out of place to refer to the hospitals of the land, retreats for the insane, and asylums for the deaf and dumb, and for the blind. The medical profession is entitled to a large share of credit for having directed the attention of the public to matters of this nature, and on account of their efficient agency in the establishment of such institutions. The general influence of a physician on the subject of morals and religion is very great. His standing in community is such as to give weight to his sentiments and example. He is everywhere, mingles with all classes, is on intimate terms with the mass of the population of every condition. He has it in his power to do much good; and this power, if he be what he ought to be, and what I am happy to believe the great body of the profession are, will not be abused. The testimony of distinguished medical gentlemen in England, and in our own land—on the importance of the Sabbath to man—has contributed much, in connection with other causes, to promote a proper observance of that sacred day.

Such, imperfectly and hastily sketched, are the claims of faithful and able physicians to public esteem and regard.

We acknowledge their force—to-day, on this occa-

sion, we are peculiarly impressed with it. The appeal is to our hearts, in language as distinct and more affecting than any it is in my power to employ. It comes from the new-made grave of our venerated friend. Dr. Benjamin Welch was born in Windsor, Conn., and would have been eighty-two years of age, had he been spared to us till February next. While a lad, his parents having removed to Norfolk, he was placed in the family of Dr. Ephraim Giteau, the first physician resident in that town, and then in extensive practice. With him the deceased resided till he was twenty-one years of age, and from him received his medical education. About the time he became of age, he received a license to practice medicine, from a board of examiners appointed by the Litchfield County Medical Society.

After an absence from town of about two years, he returned to Norfolk, and entered upon the practice of medicine, and here spent the remainder of his life, being a large part of the time the only practising physician in the place. He was frequently called to neighboring towns, and was extensively known abroad, He was thus actively employed for a period of fifty years. Endowed by nature with a constitution of great vigor, he performed an amount of labor, bodily and mental, which few men have the ability to sustain. In 1838, by recommendation of the Convention of the Connecticut Medical Society, of which he had been an active and efficient member from an early period in its history, he received the honorary degree of Dr. of Medicine, from Yale College.

At different times he has held nearly every office in

the gift of the town. When he had assistance in his professional business, he several times represented the town in the State Legislature. He was for many years Justice of the Peace, and generally the active one when business was to be transacted.

Such is the brief historical notice of Dr. Welch. Were I to stop here, I should be unjust to my own feelings, and to the sentiments of all here present, especially of the more aged persons here, whose recollections go back to the scenes of active exertion in which the deceased passed the whole of his life, save the few years last past, during which he has been disqualified for labor, by the growing infirmities of age. My own heart and your wishes prompt me to say something of his character.

Dr. Welch, both as a man and a physician, possessed and exhibited all those qualities that inspire confidence and win regard. For his day he was eminently qualified for his profession. He gathered knowledge from books, and was constantly adding to his stores from the results of his own large and long-continued experience. In practice neither rash nor timid, he reached a safe and happy medium.

In his disposition he was eminently kind, and free from all tendency to impatience or irritability. Unwilling to give pain, and eager to relieve distress, he was yielding in trifling matters, but decided and firm on occasions of serious importance.

He was prompt in meeting every call, as much so if made by the poor, as if made by the rich. No exhaustion, no state of the weather or roads, prevented his setting out. Be it cold or hot, wet or dry, sum-

mer or winter, night or day, he spared no exertions to meet every demand upon his skill and aid. From what I have learned from all quarters, the amount of unrequited labor which he performed during his long professional career, was incalculable. The art of collecting he never acquired, and, in fact, received but a small portion of his dues from those able to pay.

Nevertheless, he never complained, and, so long as his strength held out, he abated not his efforts. He was, indeed, too forgetful of himself—too reluctant to insist on his just demands.

His domestic affections were tender and strong. He was happy in his family, and contributed much to make his home an abode of peace and joy. His hopes, in regard to his children, had been realized. Of his five sons, he lived to see every one engaged in the same profession to which his own life had been devoted, and not undistinguished in it.

Many years ago, he embraced the Christian faith. He firmly believed the doctrines, and relied on the saving provisions of the Gospel. Its consolations so-laced him amid the infirmities of age, and its hope cheered him as he consciously approached the confines of the future world. His toils are over, his work is done, he has gone to his rest. He will be seen no more, as, in former years, he might have been seen, traversing, in all weathers and seasons, every part of this town. His venerable form will no more attract the attention of strangers, as it used to do, in the House of God. He will no longer be found at his own door, ready to welcome, with cheerful smile and cordial greeting, every visitor. The places that knew

him will know him no more. The sorrow awakened by these thoughts in his own beloved and affectionate family circle, now gathered on this mournful occasion, is much mitigated by their conviction, that through the grace and goodness of God, he had been enabled so fully to accomplish life's great end, and that he was so well prepared for his departure. His children will all cherish his memory ; and peculiarly favored are these sons, in having had before them so complete a model in the very line of their profession. While you emulate his zeal and fidelity in that particular, may you also follow him in his sincere piety toward God. May you know, as he did, its power to comfort and sustain you in the closing scenes of your lives.

She, too, who so long and happily trod with him the path of life, whose society was so valued by him, who watched over him so tenderly, and rendered him every attention to the last, can have only pleasant recollections associated with the memory of the departed. May these recollections soften the pangs of her grief—while she more steadily sets her face toward that world into which he has already been received.

This day, Fellow-Townsmen, we have followed to the grave, one who, during his life, was eminently useful here—one who had endeared himself to all—one who died without an enemy in the world—one, upon whose monument we are prepared to engrave, as expressive of our real sentiments, and as a fitting epitaph, the words of the text,—

“ THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN.”