

JACKSON KEMPER (1789-1870)

31st Bishop of the Episcopal Church



Jackson Kemper was born 24 December 1789 in Pleasant Valley, New York. His given name was David, but in later life he dropped the first name in favor of his middle name. He was baptized, incidentally, by Benjamin Moore in New York.

Kemper attended Columbia College, enrolling at age 15. He studied theology under John Henry Hobart, and was ordained a deacon in 1811 and a priest in 1814. Soon thereafter, he began to travel into the wilds of western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, and northwestern Virginia, and holds the distinction of being among the first Episcopalians (if not the first) to preach west of the Alleghanies.

In 1835, the Episcopal Church undertook to consecrate missionary bishops to preach the Gospel west of the settled areas, and Kemper was the first to be chosen. He promptly headed west. Having found that clergy who had lived all their lives in the settled East were slow to respond to his call to join him on the frontier, he determined to recruit priests from among men who were already in the West, and established a college in St. Louis, Missouri, for that purpose.

He went on to found Nashotah House and Racine College in Wisconsin. He established relationships and ministry with the Potawatami, Seneca, Oneida and Huron tribes of native Americans. He constantly urged a more extensive outreach to the Indian peoples, and translations of the Scriptures and the services of the Church into Indian languages.

From 1859 till his death in 1870, he was bishop of Wisconsin, but the effect of his labors

covered a far wider area. He was responsible for the organization of the dioceses of California, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin.

Kemper died after his final service, not surprisingly a Confirmation service. He had a hard time of it during the service and went home, feeling ill. He passed away in the presence of a colleague on May 24, 1870.

From a sermon preached before the Board of Missions in 1841:

“How remarkably peculiar, how vastly important is the position of our Church! Possessing as we fully believe all those characteristics which distinguished the primitive fold:--A scriptural Liturgy--evangelical doctrines--and the apostolic succession--having the form of godliness and the power thereof--free from the false and worldly scruples and the time-serving policy of civil governments--independent-- respected and influential--in the midst of an intelligent, enterprising and commercial people--Brethren! may it not be *our* duty to convert the world-- may not this high, this inestimable privilege be offered to *us*! And are we prepared--are we doing at the present moment *even one tenth* part of what we are capable? Our means and our power are extensive--and under the blessing of Him, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy, our aim--our constant, undeviating, untiring aim should be great and lofty. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.

“With the talents we possess, (and for which, as good stewards, we must finally account, at that hour when no secrets can be his), with the talents committed to our trust and the privileges we enjoy, cannot our faith, our liberality and our self-denial, *Greatly* increase? Cannot our supplications be more fervent, our economy more strict, our love of souls more ardent? Have we, as individuals, or a Church, a deep and abiding interest in the success of missions?

“Not a brother here would I accuse of indifference or cowardice. But I would stir up, with God’s permission, the pure mind of each one, by way of remembrance. It is the spirit of missions I earnestly and most affectionately advocate.

“The division into Foreign and Domestic is often arbitrary, and might, without detriment, be abolished; for no one, I presume, would wish to withdraw our heralds of the cross from Africa, suspend our incipient efforts for Texas, or abandon the much injured aborigines to all the degrading vices they have learned from unprincipled men who claim to be civilized. Let us go where duty calls--where Providence points the way--and let us rejoice in the privilege, for we assuredly ought--Oh, let us rejoice in the privilege of sending forth in the name of the Lord and under the guidance of His Spirit all those who, thoroughly instructed in sacred truths, hear the cry, ‘Come over and help us’--and cannot resist the deep, the abiding conviction concerning their sphere of duty--whose hearts burn within them when they hear of people or nations wholly given to idolatry, or licentiousness, or worldly-mindedness. Cultivate, dear brethren of the clergy, cultivate with the utmost assiduity your own vineyard--love with the strongest affections your own spiritual children, but close not your hearts to the sufferings and wants of your neighbors.”