

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 12 -

THE LUST OF DISSIDENCE

"We are not always doing the most business, when we seem to be the most busy. We may think we are truly busy when we are really only restless, and a little studied retirement would greatly enrich our returns. We are great only as we are God-possessed." - J. H. Jowett, *The Preacher*

Dr. Jowett's sage counsel is the antidote to 'much ado about nothing.' Indolence and the ministry are incompatible terms. Our Lord said: we "must work the works of Him that sent me . . . my Father worketh hitherto, and I work . . ." "As nothing tends more injuriously to the separation of the churches than heresies and disputes respecting the doctrines of religion, so nothing tends more effectually to unite the churches of GOD, and more powerfully to defend the fold of CHRIST, than the pure teaching of the Gospel, and harmony of doctrine." - From a Letter to John Calvin by Archbishop Cranmer, March 20, 1552.

WE ARE LIVING in an age when church leaders are discussing and planning for reunion and federation. Historical divisions are being welded together in an attempt to provide a solid front in Christendom against the common enemy. In the presence of these movements among denominations there are others who are given to the restriction of the bounds of true fellowship. Whether union is formal or organic, there yet remains our opportunity to "**keep the unity of the Spirit**" (Ephesians 4:3). There is a unity greater than union, and there is a communion already in existence. It is not something we have to create, but simply acknowledge and enjoy. A temptation to the minister is to limit his fellowship in CHRIST unduly and unwisely. Here a limitation of spiritual interest is a mark of unsoundness.

"Christianity is essentially a social religion; to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." So wrote John Wesley, who was eager that no one for opinions and terms should destroy the work of GOD. Enough for him if a man loved and feared GOD. That was warrant for the right hand of fellowship according to the character of a Methodist. The divisive spirit of sectarian policy was countered by him in these words:

"I would to GOD that all men knew that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. It is the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever denomination, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all: not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained.

'Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.'"

In the New Testament the word "schism" invariably means separation within, not from, the body of believers, and when this primary idea is applied to ecclesiastical matters the results are profoundly significant. Heresy in Scripture never bears its modern interpretation of false doctrine, but is a faction which divides the people of GOD. Its sinfulness lies not in that which divides, but in the division, and for this reason the forcing of any doctrines or practice as a form of communion compels division and is a sin of heresy. This means that the schismatic is the one who raises barriers to communion which GOD has not raised, and thus the guilt of schism lies with those who impose the terms of fellowship, and not with the conscientious objector, who is thereby debarred from communion.

Paul points out this peril in 1 Corinthians 3, in which he writes that Christian men at Corinth were guilty of division, faction, and separation. They had an exaggerated opinion of their own judgment and overestimated their wisdom. Each claimed loyalty to some prejudice of the flesh and claimed that to be a principle of the Spirit (cf. 1:12, 2:5, 3:21, in which are mentioned instances of the contentious spirit and the party cries). Paul, Apollos, Peter, and our Lord were set up as the leaders of rival groups. There was competition, not co-operation. One excommunicated the other, although each believed the same cardinal truths of the faith. Is not the same peril with us to-day? Paul sought to correct this lust of dissidence in the Church of GOD which violated the spirit of fellowship. The sin at Corinth was that they had broken away from the centre and had become eccentric. Christianity centres in CHRIST and He is the centre of faith and life, not systems or codes devised by man.

Let us not think that the distinctions and emphases of truth are for enmity or division, but for enrichment and direction. In the study of theology, the singing of hymns, the use of books of devotion, and the missionary enterprise, we are indebted to men of different nationality, various ecclesiastical backgrounds, and to every age of history. If we accept the enrichment for spiritual culture, why should men yield to the temptation to refuse fellowship with those who believe in the Name above every name but who may differ in secondary things? Some preachers refuse to labour alongside of their brethren, as though they themselves had received some new revelation! Perhaps some would even burn their brethren who are separate from them - if not at the stake, certainly within the citadel of a sectarian orthodoxy. But the burning of martyrs is not the defence of the faith!

If one believes in the deity of the Lord JESUS CHRIST and His atoning work as Saviour, is not that a basis of unity and fellowship in the Spirit? And is not that a platform whereon one can unite with another in bearing witness to the Gospel we seek to propagate to others? What is the irreducible minimum for faith and order in our common service? Alas! if personalities blind us to the larger issue. How sad if sectarian prejudice and interpretation of other matters should prevent us from enjoying the riches of the vast hinterland of unpossessed possessions in CHRIST.

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty;
In diversity, charity; in all things, CHRIST first.

Bunyan writes: "Again, I never cared to meddle with things that were controverted and in dispute, especially of the lowest nature." The Pilgrim Father Thomas Shepherd has this comment:

"Divisions pull down kingdoms without foreign enemies. It is the delight of hell to see churches at variance among themselves. This is Satan's continual attempt in the best churches and he is too often successful. It is most distressful to see what a small thing the devil will make to do his work: a word, a gesture, a garment will do it. One must have liberty to speak one thing, and another, another thing. I am of this mind, saith one. But I am not of that mind, saith another. Even a breath of suspicion will not seldom do it. Oh, tremble to entertain a thought of contention! Love one another sincerely, and you will live together quietly."

"Besides," says Bunyan, "I did let alone the things that engendered strife, because my proper work did run in another channel, even to carry an awakening word: to that therefore did I stick and adhere."

Other avenues of this divisive and disruptive experience come to a minister when he refuses the wider fellowship of the saints. It may come through fatigue. One of the sins of the ministry is that of overwork (as well as sloth) according to some acute critics. There is a danger of doing too much as well as of doing too little. Life is not for work, but work for life, and when it is carried to the extent of undermining life or unduly absorbing it, work is not praiseworthy but blameworthy. Ill health caused by hectic living, under-sleeping; poisoned body and mind, resulting in irritation, quick temper, arrogance, and a quarrelling spirit, is sometimes the price paid by "work drunkenness." Then a man is prone to shut himself off from those richer fellowships in CHRIST. He begins to live a solitary life.

Another open sore is found when a man is divisive because he thinks he has not received his deserts in life for faithful and honest service. None of us is likely to get what we deserve from our fellows, anyway! Let a minister ask himself frankly where he thinks he ought to stand in his calling. A number are found to complain that the larger sphere of influence and the road to seeming success are denied them. It is true that men of real eminence go without earthly reward, while others (apparently by their push and scheming) get more than they deserve. Certain popular preachers are marked in low and plain figures by their brethren, although even here it may be done in innocence and without malice. And it has been known that men after a long ministry, are upset and do not rejoice in the elevation of the younger man. A temptation to dissidence comes when a man is a disappointed man.

Surely we shall be delivered from this perilous perversion if we are shut up to the supreme task. "**This one thing I do**" (Paul - Philippians 3:13) is a means of concentration and consecration. While life is narrowed thereby, it broadens; while it limits, it liberates. The major interest controls and the minor interest falls into place. Losing life, we find it; spending ourselves, we save ourselves. The lust of dissidence is corrected by the love of discipline. A house divided against itself cannot stand, and a scattered ministry is thin and unbalanced.

When this sin attacks, it is noticed in certain men through their lack of poise and loss of equilibrium. It is easier to attack a doctrine or a movement or a person, and our auditors find out our shortage of love. Belligerency in the pulpit is belittling to the dignity and grandeur of the ministry committed to us. "**He shall not strive, nor cry,**"! was prophesied of the Model Preacher. To "**earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints**" is an inspired exhortation to which we must be faithful, but it has suffered many things from bad exegesis and faulty application. Sometimes, because the man was divisive, it has become an outlet to vent spleen and irritability instead of a true apologetic.

We have all noticed the loneliness of some men in the ministry. If it is the loneliness of self-esteem and self-seclusion and an aloofness of isolation it may be disruptive. Every true man of GOD is lonely in the crowd as he moves in the realm of eternal values and dispenses spiritual truth. The loneliness is so intense for some that they find a weight of spirit which tempts them to break away from life. Again, such aloofness may be born of timidity of spirit, afraid to venture lest sensitiveness is bruised. A few miss the change of ministry leading to enlarged growth in grace because of the limits of missing the wider fellowship. A man should not work alone.

This peril of dissidence is present when a man loses his ideals. In reading volumes on preaching, such as the Yale Lecture series, one feels that here are men who open the windows of their lives and let us look in. The lecturer was not conscious of that, but in sharing freely and publicly his ideals of the ministry we discover his autobiography. This is natural in such a calling, for a man can but speak out of his experience the things learned. To lose those indispensable ideals is to succumb to temptations, for then we are already dead, though perhaps we still have a name to live.

Another tragic hour is that which has been described by Cotton Mather, one time president of Harvard University. Speaking of the realistic character of the Christian ministry, he said, "I am sorry that I must conclude my advice for your diligence in the discharge of pastoral duties, with a warning, that you must serve many ungrateful people, and may be in many ways maltreated by them, who are under the stringent obligation to support you." We need a word of encouragement at times, but when a man does his best over a long period for a church which is blind and disinterested, some good men yield to despondency and, like Elijah under the juniper tree, are given to self-pity. Perspective is lost, and the sick man desires a change. Such defeatism is overcome only by the vision of GOD. When a mood of self-pity comes, we are restless and dissenting. A bracing antidote to discouragement and discontent and peevishness and railing is found in Paul's course of culture offered in 2 Corinthians 6:3-13 to all ministers. The key is steadfastness allied to time and patience. Through the perils, powers, and paradoxes he describes the Apostle reveals his heart about the ministry and the lust of dissension and variance upsetting life.

Every minister of the New Testament should read the Book of Leviticus for its appeal and demand for a high-standard of life on the part of those who minister before the Lord. We are not to copy the ancient priesthood in its ritual and practice, having found a more excellent ministry through our Great HIGH PRIEST, but we may learn something of those abiding principles and suggestions concerning the sacredness of the man of GOD set apart. Leviticus 10:1-7 reveals a tragic event in the lives of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, who **"took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified."**

When these two ministers lost their characters they lost their lives. Their sin lay in offering incense in a manner contrary to the revealed and declared will of GOD. Priests then understood that the only fire to be used in the Tabernacle was to be fire from the altar - fire that had come

from Heaven. Probably, too, they used what spices were at hand, not the proper incense. Neither education nor station nor privileges (Exodus 24:9) are sufficient to keep men from this presumption. So GOD vindicates His honour in judgment. Will-worship is not acceptable to GOD. His will is holiness. The warning of Leviticus 10:8-11 would point to one of the sins of priesthood. Vain desire and falsification of GOD's will are allied to drunken indulgence. From these we need to be free in order to minister worthily.

Brethren, it may seem trivial or unimportant how we serve GOD, but a reading of Leviticus teaches that "trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle." It is not permitted in the spiritual priesthood we exercise after the manner of the New Testament to kindle fire ourselves. The only fire permissible is that from the altar. Central in revelation and history and experience is the Cross, and the fire of that holy Gospel is the HOLY SPIRIT of GOD, who is the Spirit of Holiness. The energy of the flesh, the cleverness of the mind without the anointing and unction of the Holy One are "**strange [fires].**" GOD teaches in this Book of Leviticus that He makes a difference between the unclean and the clean (11:47).

That harrowing story of Numbers 22-24: also is written to be learned by us who traffic in this ministry of holy things. For there Balaam was raised up by GOD to witness to his generation through a life of dissidence and variance, that a man may stoop to become an impostor and deceiver, and yet may be a preacher. Official and outward brilliance is not enough if there is an inward rotting through yielding to temptation. The Apostle Jude writes the funeral epitaph of ministers who thus fall:

"Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core. These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him. These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit" (Jude 11-19).

When a man like Demas (2 Timothy 4:9-11) forsakes the high office that is his this spirit of instability is upon him and its cause is a love for this present age. Of course, the spirit of the age is always against holiness, and its enervating influence tests every minister. One wonders if Demas, who had a relapse, had experienced what Paul tells of in Galatians 1:15-18? This autobiographical note lays bare one of the profoundest secrets of the preacher's safety and salvation. It was not only that our Lord JESUS had appeared to Paul and converted him, but that also He had been revealed in him. This solitude in Arabia brought to Paul the revelation of the uniqueness of the Son of GOD. One must read Alexander Whyte's most moving and moulding

chapter on this subject in his Bible Characters to discover what this grace might mean to all who deal with the intricacies of the heart. Our Lord "**needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man**" (John 2:25), and we, too, require that spiritual knowledge and fulness of insight. It is ours through the solitudes of Arabia.

A busy, flitting life is not necessarily the best, fullest life. The lust of dissidence is seen too often in the scattering of our energies over a wide area, leaving us without spirit for meditation. Once men prepared for life by retirement to the solitude of the desert and school, and it was difficult to entice them into the world: now we find this world too much with us, and it is difficult to bring ourselves away from it to dwell in the secret place of that mystic evangelical experience of CHRIST alone. This is the lost art in our age of rush and machinery. The man of GOD must prepare his horology of the meditative art to "**save [himself], and them that hear [him].**"

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