

## **A Minister's Obstacles**

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### **THE SPECTRE OF PROFESSIONALISM**

**"Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made LIKE UNTO HIS BRETHREN, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest, in things pertaining to GOD, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered, being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted (Hebrews 2:17, 18).**

**"Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, JESUS the Son of GOD, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities: but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).**

"GOD has a definite life-plan for every human person, girding him, visibly or invisibly for some exact thing which it will be the true significance and glory of his life to have accomplished." - Horace Bushnell.

**"To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world . . ." - The Lord CHRIST.**

**"It was not you that sent me hither, but God." - Joseph, in Egypt.**

**"Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" - Mordecai to Esther.**

**"I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness." - CHRIST to Paul.**

**"There was a man sent from God . . ." - Spoken of John the Baptist.**

To PROMOTE the highest ends of the ministry the servant of GOD must begin with himself. A ministry which is uncertain of its own power is a travesty of the sacred calling. Ministers are first of all men. It is easy to cosset self and forget that the messenger is important with the message and methods. A man must be "**a man of GOD**" (1 Timothy 6:11). He may be like Apollos, deficient in spiritual light and life (Acts 18:25), or exercising a ministry like Thomas Chalmers of Scotland, "**having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof,**" or like John Wesley waiting for that experience of the "warmed heart." In the atmosphere of hurry in which we live day by day, we are in danger of losing our souls and the secret known by Paul - "**to live is CHRIST.**" The routine of the years may bring us sometime to the verge of perfunctory automatism and that first call of the Spirit seem faint and far away. The spectre or

wraith of this temptation comes with devastating effect upon a man in mid-life. There is a "**destruction that wasteth at noonday.**"

We should be sure of the DIVINE COMPULSION which carried us into the Ministry of the Word.

We need to realise that we must be good men, *for the office does not sanctify the person but the person the office.* And the innermost secret of personal life is the certitude that we obeyed the heavenly vision. Have we a sense of VOCATION? Without it a man enters the sacred profession at his peril. Compare the solemn words of Jeremiah 23:21 - "**I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil ways and from the evil of their doings.**"

To be "**in Christ**" before being "**in the ministry**" is foundational and indispensable. How can we be blessed to others unless we ourselves are monuments of sovereign grace? There is a natural religion and there is a revealed religion, but the only soul-saving religion is the religion of personal and spiritual experience. Paul speaks of being separated and called by the grace of GOD, who revealed His Son in him (Galatians 1:15, 16). My brethren, the science of personal religion, the science of the inward spiritual life, is by far the most important, the most universal, the oldest, and the most fruitful of all the experimental sciences. The deeper the search into Holy Writ, the more do we discover ourselves in our sinfulness and in GOD's salvation for us. Well did Paul say to young Timothy that he must save himself also (see 1 Timothy 4:16). The "**here am I**" of Isaiah followed a sense of the divine majesty and glory when the prophet knew the compelling love of GOD and he could do none other but respond.

"On Christmas Day, 1884, between three and four o'clock," writes Dr. A. E. Garvie, "I was reading Stalker's Life Of Paul, and there came home to me the world's need of the preacher. As though I had heard a voice, the words possessed my mind - '**Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel.**' I sat down at once and wrote my decision to my Father."

The old question put to Probationers in Scotland, "Are not zeal for the honour of GOD, love to JESUS CHRIST, and desire to save souls your great motives and chief inducement to enter the function of the holy ministry?" was not answered by a bow of the head. Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter, and Paul feared to answer that except by divine constraint. Let no one at any time think of a better living, but only of a holier life. A sincere and right intention is necessary. We need to watch our souls lest we are undone in the realm of motive.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon used to say that no man should enter the ministry who could keep out of it. Preaching must become a passion, and ministry a sacred calling, or else it will be a very humdrum affair. Yes and a soul-destroying experience! "Charles," said Coleridge to Charles Lamb, "have you ever heard me preach?" "My dear Coleridge," was the answer, "I have never heard you do anything else." The old fisherman will not discard his rod, and the man called of the Spirit never is anything else and never ceases to be a preacher of the everlasting Gospel. "Despise not the ministry," said Thomas Goodwin, "for GOD had but one Son and He was a minister."

We should be sure of the DIVINE COMMISSION which is never revoked.

There is no ghost like this, that a man feels he has somehow lost his commission. Amid the dally round and ceaseless labour, we who feed others need to be replenished. A man of GOD must constantly recall the glow of that dedication hour and move to richer experience of the grace of GOD in CHRIST.

The Word of GOD says, "**But when the fulness of the time was come. . .**" (Galatians 4:4). Then GOD sent forth His Son, but Paul thought also of the setting apart of man for his life-work. He saw every event, small and great, converging upon one far-off happening wherein a solitary man is set apart for sacred ministry. It was a tremendous day in the experience of Dr. A. J. Gossip when Dr. Alexander Whyte inducted him to his first charge. He, comprehensively surveyed the past years of that church's life and work alongside of his short life, revealing that every providence of GOD had led up to that particular moment when Gossip, by the grace of GOD, was there as the pastor of that flock. The hour strikes for every servant of GOD so that he may say that all the contingencies, happenings, events of his life are contributory and preparatory to this conviction, that it is this authenticating experience which gives one a sense of vocation. Do we know such an hour?

The preacher who has this must be continually receiving the grace of GOD. He is a transmitter of truth and thereby open to the peril of familiarity in holy things. To be alive to truth and to GOD, the divine revelation must pass through his heart and mind before it is passed on to others. What a man sees and feels will be of value to others. Brethren, we traffic in holy things, great eternal realities: it is ours to make them communicable to our people. We are not paid to preach; we are given an allowance to be free to preach. We are not in the employ of the Church, but the servants of GOD and "**your servants for Jesus' sake.**" And there is a nobility and dignity of office which a man finds when he is experiencing the sufficiency of his commission now.

It is reported of the late John Robertson of Glasgow, a preacher for forty years, that he was a backslider for a long time. The glow had gone. He decided to resign, and one morning prayed, "O GOD, Thou didst commission me forty years ago, but I have blundered and failed and I want to resign this morning." He broke down as he prayed, and in between his sobs he heard the voice of the Lord saying: "John Robertson, 'tis true I commissioned you forty years ago; 'tis true you have blundered and failed, but, John Robertson, I am not here for you to resign your commission, but to RE-SIGN your commission." That re-signing was the beginning of greater and new things for the preacher.

Is not our need to know more of this abundant life in the soul and to become incarnate with divine power? In this are the marks of the true minister. Not by intellectual power or social gifts or personal witchery do we become channels of grace, but in the plenitude of the Spirit. It was David Brainerd, whose brief but marvellous ministry was surcharged with divine power who was used to transform the Indians of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. His experience of grace and prayer influenced Henry Martyn to "burn out for GOD." William Carey caught the holy contagion also, and, later, that missionary enthusiast, Dr. A. J. Gordon, declares how his torch was kindled at the altar of Brainerd's unquenchable devotion. And then Dr. Andrew Murray, saint of South America, was moved by Brainerd's Journal to a greater ministry. Each in turn had that divine dealing with their souls, so that Murray says, "GOD has no more precious gift to a

church or an age than a man who lives as the embodiment of His will, and inspires those around him with the faith of what grace can do."

The New Testament is full of this deeper life, and further illustrations of that experience are found in the lives of J. Hudson Taylor, Charles G. Finney, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Samuel Rutherford, Andrew Bonar, Tauler, and Dwight L. Moody, who speaks of a day in New York when there came a crisis in his life and when he had such a token of the love of GOD that he had to ask GOD to stay His hand! Moments of high altitude of the spirit like these are sufficient to lay the spectre of any sense of "professionalism" which might creep in to rob us of the certitude of our commission and ordination by the pierced hands.

We should be sure of the DIVINE CALLING in the pressure of GOD's service.

The temptation to the minister is besetting when he sees little return for his effort. Or when he is challenged by the critical or censorious one who makes sport of such work. Then it is not easy to be a voice for GOD. A Reformation minister was challenged about his authority in preaching. He handed his Hebrew Bible to the objector with these words: "There, read it if you can!" How many of us can read our title deeds? Are we certain of the calling wherewith CHRIST has called us? A fastidious preacher was challenged by a layman because he boasted of his qualifications. The layman said,

"Why, see now,  
Without your gown ye dare not preach;  
Without your book ye could not preach;  
Without your pay ye would not preach!"

That is a severe indictment. but the test is - are we in this service because it is our passion and life-blood, or are we hirelings? A true man of GOD will preach and serve with out any of the supports mentioned.

To lose this conviction of the divine imperative - "[b]Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel/b]" - is to be devoid of usefulness. Power for service lies, not in intellectual gift or training or ability, but in a gift of GOD, an overwhelming sense of the presence of the Most High, a heightened awareness of the grace of CHRIST, mighty to save. John Wesley for thirty-odd years was a failure. He did not lack for opportunity or education, but he knew not GOD's will for his life. When that experience came to him he became the man whose name is written across the habitable globe. He said to his preachers: "Your business is not to preach so many sermons, and to take care of this or that society, but to save as many souls as you can." That passion for souls was in the sage counsel and holy ambition he brought.

Alas! sometimes this lack of conviction pervades many ministries. Dr. Henry van Dyke once said that on spiritual matters this is pre-eminently an age of doubt; its coat of arms is an interrogation point rampant above three bishops dormant, and its motto is Query. Indeed, the general tone of this generation is uncertainty rather than certitude, scepticism rather than conviction, hesitancy rather than dogmatism. But the man of GOD must know where he stands!

If we have any doubts as to whether the Gospel of CHRIST is equal to the great task which He claims for it, then we should not enter a pulpit. If we think it played out, or effete, we ought to go

and do something else. If afraid of the faces of men or a slave to their opinions, we should take up some other profession. The hour demands intrepid men who will say, as Seneca's pilot to Neptune, "You may sink me or you may save me, but I will hold my rudder true." I like that of Martin Luther, who, after he reached Worms, and was on trial, said, "Here I stand! I can do no other! GOD help me! Amen!"

Brethren, we have gone forth unfit for the task, seeking to heal others when we needed to be healed. We have urged others to run in the race, and our own feet have been heavy. Our souls have been imperilled because we have been professional and middlemen caught between man's judgment and self-pity instead of being flaming messengers of the Evangel of Grace. But we learn, and, like the preacher of old, we can say, "**My heart had great experience**" (Ecclesiastes 1:16). Out of the Word of GOD and from Christian biography we find much to wound and to heal. David Brainerd's testimony was:

"Afterwards I was much assisted in preaching. I know not that ever GOD helped me to preach in a more dose and distinguishing manner for the trial of men's state. Through the infinite goodness of GOD, I felt what I spoke; He enabled me to treat on Divine truth with uncommon dearness; and yet I was so sensible of my defects in preaching, that I could not be proud of my performance, as at some times; and blessed be the Lord for this mercy!"

It is in this deeper sense that we learn to become a student of priorities, discovering in the ministry that a man's first duty in the study of the divine strategy is to know what we are in GOD's scale of values, the supreme aims and His most priceless tools. I like Benjamin Jowett's saying, "that a man's final stadium of labours ought to be his best when he pulls himself together, surveys his experience and what it has taught him, and commits himself to GOD once more for the fulfillment of his vocation." Our minds can always leap forward in the spirit of that couplet which stirs imagination:

"There are hills beyond Pentlands,  
And firths beyond Forth."

We may be perfectly sure that the one thing which we all know about the craft or mystery of the ministry is our sense of failure in it. The ideal allures us to ever increasing attainment and the well which is deep is within every godly life, and dally we may keep on drinking from that living water of the Spirit. A cistern contains, but a fountain overflows. Here is the secret of divine affluence, being "filled into all the fulness of GOD."

"O Master Workman, if Thou choose  
The thing I make, the tool I use,  
If all be wrought to Thy design,  
And Thou transmute the Me and Mine,  
The noise of saw and plane shall be  
Parts in the heavenly harmony,  
And all the din of working days  
Reach Thee as deep and peaceful praise."

What shall we say about doubt? One of life's tragedies is the man beset with doubt and unbelief.

The lapse from faith or from righteousness will undo the man of GOD. The effect of doubt depends upon the kind of doubt. There is a doubt which is a challenge to the sincere and the devout. That is the questioning of truth in the way of finding the truth. But the insidious danger of doubt is that of intellectual unbelief. A man with a broken sword is not likely to wield his strength in the battle. And there are those who lack certainty and conviction concerning much in Biblical revelation. To essay a ministry under such conditions is to court disaster. Better to depart honourably or find certitude of Christian truth before continuing in the fight.

Much of the unrest of the ministry to-day is the result of an unsettlement in theological thought with reference to those essential doctrines of the faith of Apostolic Christianity. A man is unmade if he is not sure, and the acceptance of a minister's position without a true minister's conviction of truth is the repetition of forms devoid of meaning, with the benefit of allowances for sustenance under seemingly false pretences. A preacher in the New Testament meaning is one who is there to magnify the office, an ambassador for GOD, and it reveals a lack of conscience if a man has not the spiritual and intellectual honesty for such a holy trust.

It is not inconceivable that a man may lapse into scepticism concerning the very foundations of his faith. In the uprising of doubt, common reasons may fall. Then some stronger restraint must be forthcoming to deliver us from infidelity. There have been those who have known this storm of temptation and questioned awhile whether they were indeed a Christian or a hireling and reprobate. Here the way of deliverance lies in digging to the very foundations and seriously examining the reasons of Christianity and to give a hearing to all that may be laid against it, that so faith might be indeed our own through the grace of GOD. When a man rises through faith and reason to rest in the validity of Christian experience of the love and mercy of CHRIST in his own soul, nothing is so firmly believed as that which sometimes has been in doubt in intellectual struggle.

That which will best help us to weather the blast of this temptation is an inner life which has its roots in the obedience of faith to our Lord and Saviour. Private communion and personal commitment are the bases of devoted ministry. If a man lacks this background of experience to sustain him under the trial of faith, he is being forced to examine his heart about his motives in giving himself to the high calling of GOD in CHRIST. How tragic to be a clergyman without CHRIST, a preacher without power! The shame and sorrow of a lifeless profession tell of the primary neglect of personal, heart - experience of JESUS CHRIST. Our destruction is of ourselves! The arrow that wounds us was feathered from our own wings. Of the priesthood it is asserted rightly (Hebrews 5:4) that "**no man taketh this honour unto himself but he that is called of God,**" and the word applies in its fulness to the Christian preacher who, without a true sense of vocation, cannot discharge his ministry.

Considering medicine as a calling, the Greeks set the standards in 400 B.C. by the Oath of Hippocrates. In that document is set forth that the doctor's one business is to heal, and that, accordingly, any knowledge acquired by him which promises health for men may not lawfully be kept a secret for gain. Since he enters a house only to heal, he is there on honour: he must not use his opportunities to corrupt or seduce, and he must not publish what has been told him in confidence. What is distinctive in the profession is its noble simplicity of aim and its exacting code of honour. A like rule applies to the minister, whose Gospel is to match a world-wide disaster. Exacting demands are made upon the preacher and pastor, and he who enters upon its

calling at his ease, thinking only of advantages and not of obligations, is false to the very meaning of his calling.

In the measure that we know the mastery and lordship of our Saviour, whose we are and whom we serve, we shall watch for our own souls, and then for the souls of others. We shall then have a "sense of vocation."

"Live out Thy life within me, O Saviour, King of Kings;  
Be Thou Thyself the answer to all my questionings;  
Live out Thy life within me, In all things have Thy way,  
I the transparent medium, Thy glory to display."

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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