

A Minister's Obstacles

by Ralph G. Turnbull

1959

Fleming H. Revell Company New York

Chapter 11 -

THE VANITY OF CLEVERNESS

"You do not have to be anything in particular to be a lawyer; I have been a lawyer, and I know. You do not have to be anything in particular, except a kind-hearted man, perhaps, to be a physician; you do not have to be anything, nor to undergo any strong spiritual change, to be a merchant. The only profession which consists in being something is the ministry of our Lord and Saviour - and it does not consist of anything else. It is manifested in other things, but it does not consist of anything else."

- President Woodrow Wilson.

"No sir," said Dr. Johnson, "the ministry is not an easy calling, and I do not envy the man who makes it easy."

IN CONSIDERING the subtle puffing up of mind which is easily contracted by the minister, we should remember this may be the excess of virtue. High traits in the character of men in our craft are the virtues of magnanimity, humanity, and humility. These are marks of true greatness. But there is the peril of contentment with something less of an exalted standard. In our handling of truth it is tragic if we exalt the little and non-essential at the expense of the great and noble themes. Imagining that a certain position and dignity confer rights in personal speech is too often the undoing of a man.

The Pauline exhortation runs: "**[Avoid] profane and vain babblings**" (I Timothy 6:20). Believing that divine revelation is to be preferred to human speculation, we shall not fall into the snare of the cheap-jack and charlatan. Buffoonery and sensationalism are signs of a carnal mind and the craving for religious stimulants. The gladiatorial sport is one of the hall-marks of antiquity and a stage in the evolution of man's seeming advance, but it is unbecoming to find the minister stooping to the jejune and the blighting of reverence. "Devotees of the old overrate this or that because it is quaint and unusual; devotees of the modern overrate this or that because it is new and startling." What really matters is the absolute value; and the ultimate test of a ministry is its power to sustain and satisfy through the regular channels appointed of GOD.

There is an intellectual snobbery which is an offence to GOD and a stumbling block to man. The parade of human achievements as a basis of "getting on" or being successful in the ministry is to be condemned by good taste. The mental discipline given through youth and manhood in preparation for the life-work - if exceptional and above the average - should not give us the idea that we are superior in our utterances of truth over those who have not been thus led. GOD

prepares His servants in a variety of schools, as the Bible well illustrates, and an Amos is a mightier preacher than certain priests of Bethel.

We discover that it is not in the letter but in the spirit that truth is diffused effectively, and a dedicated personality is the final criterion of devoted service and usefulness. The perfecting of the instrument and the sharpening of the tools may be in other ways than by a university course, and it is '**vanity of vanities**' to presume that we can minister effectively with that alone. It takes Arabia and its solitude to bring the mind of Paul to know the mind of CHRIST. We need to pray to be delivered from this vain shew and puffing up of the flesh because of any academic privilege. With or without it we need the passion of

"Oft, when the Word is on me to deliver,
Lifts the illusion and the Truth lies bare,"

in order that we may become self-forgetful and empowered in spirit as we go forth with "**Thus saith the Lord!**" The school does not make the preacher. Let a man be "hydropic with a sacred thirst" and he will grow in grace and in knowledge.

The man of some gift is tempted to cover up that which is vital because of the spirit of the age. The reproach of foolishness is laid to our charge and so we think we shall become "smart" men. To preach our Saviour crucified unto the religious, a stumbling block, and unto the irreligious, foolishness - is to become contemptible in the eyes of philosophers, scholars, even priestly ecclesiastics. This Christian redemption seems nonsense to the ears of the natural man who cannot understand the things of the Spirit, and he who would contact the intelligentsia will find a certain supercilious attitude towards the central themes of our faith. Then a man is tempted to become popular by sacrificing truth in the interests of theories and wandering down by-paths of secular preachments. If we are sometimes disdained by the ultra-literary, we need not object but prosecute our ministry to them as well as to others. A reading of Romans 1 and First Corinthians 1 will reveal how dark is the mind without spiritual illumination. Our peril is to ape the schoolmen in a way that dethrones our message. They need to be "**born again**," even as we. The Cross was GOD's answer to the wisdom of man. It is the same to-day (I Corinthians 1:18).

This is not to say that no men of intellect are on the side of Christianity. There are scholars and philosophers, devout and dedicated. But the world spirit seems to ridicule or sneer at the Gospel as being "simple" and not for thinkers. A travesty of truth, surely, for the Gospel is so profound that no one age has yet exhausted its fulness through the study of the greatest minds of history. So we need not try to be clever, only clear. There is no need to change the Gospel in this generation. Mister Worldly-Wiseman is not far away in every ministry to side-track us by the delusion of the subtleties of cleverness.

"Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (I Corinthians 3:18). Our true wisdom is the centrality of the sacrificial Gospel, everlasting in its quality and appeal and power. This paradox of power is more to us than the arts and flatteries of men who side-track power by love, love by sacrifice, sacrifice by death, and death by the Cross. This is the crucial issue of the hour. The man who acknowledges his weakness is strong indeed, for thereby he discovers in his limitations of knowledge and insight that through the supply of the Spirit of CHRIST JESUS GOD has the

means of filling up that which is lacking.

A luminous story is given us in the New Testament concerning a preacher who was saved out of his imperfect experience (Acts 18). The life of Apollos is the story of a cultured, devoted man. Socially, he had the advantage of a university city, with its educational opportunities and life. In intellect he was disciplined to handle the Scriptures with learning and skill. He was a mighty moral influence in the community and did not lack zeal and enthusiasm to set forth his discoveries of the way of GOD revealed in the Bible. Wedded to these things were gifts of eloquence as an orator of the Gospel, sharing with Paul the place of leadership in the Church and having many people waiting upon his word.

But there you have the revelation of a man who was clever with dedicated gifts, yet proclaiming an imperfect message. All his thinking and teaching were pre-Pentecost. His ministry of truth was limited to the message of the reformer John the Baptist. He was competent after the standards of the Church, but he lacked the dynamic of the full Christian conviction. There was no Cross, no Resurrection, no HOLY SPIRIT in his attractive ministry.

Diligence without dynamic is insufficient. He had certain facts of truth, but not the fulness of truth. With mental acumen he extolled truth about JESUS, but failed to uplift JESUS alone. Not all truth is the Gospel, although the Gospel is truth. Apollos could argue about water baptism but knew not Spirit baptism. His teaching was set forth with mental adroitness, but, while not erroneous, it missed essentials. Some clever men to-day declaim on the wonderful life of JESUS, His example, His leadership, His teaching.

But these are not sufficient for a lost world. We need the CHRIST of Calvary, the Slain Lamb, the Risen and Enthroned Lord, and a sanctifying SPIRIT. How modern is the story of Apollos! JESUS, the greatest Man, the ideal Teacher, the last word in ethics: a perfect Humanity, yet Deity, but no thorns, no pierced side, not the conqueror of death and sin. An imperfect Gospel, although clever, does not save, does not cast out demons, does not cleanse the conscience, and does not bind up the broken-heart.

One saving feature in the life and character of an Apollos was his humility. He was willing to learn from those who did not share his gifts and endowments, but who had been schooled by GOD in another way. Criticism might have spoiled him, but sympathy helped him. The Plague of London in 1665 was not stayed by the waters of the Thames, but by the fire of 1666. The fiery baptism accomplished what water could not do. The man of GOD requires spiritual unction to rise to the fulness of his ministry. "**Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord,**" is a word to be pondered in the secret place. There has come to us from extra-Biblical sources a reputed saying of our Lord: "He that is near me is near the fire." That is the heart of an experience of white-heat Christianity wherein fulness of knowledge is not alone of the schools but of the heart.

If this story teaches us one truth it is that an A-1 Gospel cannot arise from a C-3 theology. Our creed should not determine the CHRIST, but our CHRIST should fashion our creed. This theology is the theology of experience and the Interpreter's House is the place of light. Our spirit must be open to new and fresh illuminations of truth, even as we are loyal to what we know. We shall be ready to confess our ignorance, first to ourselves, and then, if need be, to others. "Deep

theology," says Faber, "is the best fuel of devotion; it readily catches fire, and once kindled it burns long." We need to dwell deep as Christian men in order to bring forth the positive teaching and preaching for our day. For one of his sermons Newman chose as a title these terrifying words: "The salvation of the hearer the motive of the preacher." That will not be attained by sheer cleverness but by a passion for souls suffusing all our gifts and graces.

After all, it is not by the clever man but by the average man that GOD's work is done. But such a man must be one who adds force and grasp to tenderness of spirit, and to a fine character there must be united an intense moral and spiritual enthusiasm. The trumpet call is the most inspiring of all sounds, because it summons men to spurn ease and self-indulgence and fear, and sends us forth to venture in the great spiritual adventure. The kind of man required in the ministry is determined by the character of the person whom we would serve. Small employers can take small employees. Little institutions can take little men. But our Lord and Master demands men of vision and self-sacrifice, men of conviction and faith. To be a "**minister of Jesus Christ**" is the crowning commendation of life. A man engaged in this ministry is one set apart. It is this separateness or dedication to his calling which gives tone and quality and dignity with grace to the highest of all callings before men. The temptation of the "clever" man is to mistake his gifts for power instead of the GIVER.

The reward of a man who overcomes this temptation is not in any secular promotion in the Church, not even an increase in material things. It is not by achieving a fortune or a place or gaining publicity that a man is successful. But the reward of an ideal pursuit is itself ideal. To write yourself deeply on the tablets of men's hearts is better than being thought merely clever. Our testing is as active service is to the soldier; the living of the spiritual life is the task of the spiritual man. The summons comes to us all. If we are to translate the Gospel into the currency of our generation we should beware of becoming intellectual foreigners - detached, isolated, out of touch. Contact with the sins and sorrows of life enable a man to know the one thing that matters.

Further, we need to learn the grace of self-effacement. The more earnest and faithful the preacher, the more he must seek to be hidden behind his Master. The fact of being the centre of the gaze of a congregation tempts some to the thought of their dress, the mode of address, and other personal ways which might attract the attention of their hearers. John Wesley said a preacher's raiment should be as stainless as his character. The address should be free from personal adornment which draws approval of people at the expense of the stabbing-word to the conscience and of the Word. "**We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.**" "**For Christ sent me... to preach the gospel: not with the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.**" (2 Corinthians 4:5 and 1 Corinthians 1:17. See also 1 Corinthians 2:1-11).

We seek, then, for simplicity in speech, directness of address, that we may win a verdict through preaching and witnessing for CHRIST. Not silliness, not slang, but the language of a heart full of love to CHRIST and for men is the divine medium to avoid the misuse and the overadornment in preaching. We need not fear such simplicity as if our reputation would be injured. The outstanding Gospel preachers have been men with the art of simple, pure, Biblical speech. Browning says:

"It were to be wished the faults were fewer
In the earthen vessel holding the treasure;
But the one thing is - doth it hold good measure?
Heaven soon sets right all other matters."

We do not need to aspire to eloquence as if we sought to parade our gifts. A man is eloquent when his heart is aflame, not by tricks of language, but by the appeal of sincerity and compassion.

Another peril in being clever is the overuse of theological terms which are not always understood by this age. Truly, we need to educate our people in the great doctrines of the faith and ought so to do. But let us translate the words of the study into the simpler, non-technical words of our common speech, causing the gem of truth to shine brighter by this furbishing. "**The common people heard him gladly.**" We do not need to be clever, just clear. For a true preacher is one who reaches the souls of others. In seeking to reach men there is this danger of neutralizing the truth. The study of chemistry shows that there is a process whereby the peculiar properties of one substance are, by another, destroyed or rendered inert or imperceptible. Thus, acids and alkalis more or less completely neutralize each other. It is, possible to render neutral and ineffective the vital truths of redemption by the vanity of cleverness.

Preaching should be attractive and effective. Paul hints that in seeking attractiveness we may sacrifice effectiveness. He had the culture of Hebrew religion and Greek philosophy, and yet these did not spoil his presentation of the message. But many moderns have been overtaken in this fault. The message of truth has become a formal essay or a philosophical discussion. The student is urged to set up a high standard of literary and homiletic art (which has a place), but there is peril if the Scriptural presentation of truth is covered by man's art without Spirit-directness. Every man should be a law to himself in his preaching, but every preacher should be yielded to the Spirit of GOD for the delivery of Spirit-clothed thoughts and words. A Bishop Butler produced masterpieces in sermons of argument and analysis and philosophic acumen - but the conversions? Whereas the utterances of Wesley and Whitefield of the Scriptural message in the power of the Spirit-reached multitudes of responsive hearts. Our self-conscious pleasing of the aesthetic is a self-complacency to avoid. But unction is the need of the mind and heart more than anything else - this mysterious extra of inspiration and abandon. Then, the preacher is wholly loosed for his task and something is transferred from preacher to hearer in the impartation of the message. Indifferent either to praise or blame, a man set free from the acids of modern religion is a vessel unto honour.

He held the lamp that Sabbath day
So low that none could miss the way,
And yet so high, to bring to sight
That picture fair of CHRIST the Light,
That, gazing up, the lamp between
The hand that held it was not seen.

He held the pitcher, stooping low,
To lips of little ones below;
Then raised it to the weary saint,

And bade him drink when sick and faint.
They drank, the pitcher them between,
The hand that held it was not seen.

He blew the trumpet soft and clear,
That trembling sinners need not fear;
And then with louder note and bold,
To storm the walls of Satan's hold;
The trumpet coming thus between,
The hand that held it was not seen.

And when our Captain says, 'Well done,
Thou good and faithful servant; come,
Lay down the pitcher and the lamp;
Lay down the trumpet, leave the camp,'
The weary hands will then be seen
Clasped in the pierced ones, naught between.

Let Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), Kilmany, one of Scotland's noted preachers be a warning of the vanity of cleverness. For seven years he lacked spiritual life and power and then came regeneration. Once a friend told him, "I find you are aye busy, but come when I may, I never find you at your studies for the Sabbath." "Oh," replied Chalmers - in those pre-conversion days, "an hour or two on the Saturday evening is quite enough for that." But when Chalmers experienced that "expulsive power of a new affection," the same friend often found him poring over the Bible. "I never come in now, but I find you aye at your Bible." "All too little, John, all too little!" This was the beginning of those days of true ministry, when he learned that "to preach CHRIST is the only effective way to preach morality." No more clever sermons, but messages from the heart of GOD.

Concerning Thomas Chalmers, Lord Rosebery wrote:

"Oratory must, then, have been one main secret of his amazing power. Energy was another. Tenderness, the tenderness of sympathy, was another. Read the story of his connection with young Thomas Smith and you will hear his heart beating aloud. But his base was CHARACTER. Through all the splendours of his speech, through all his activity of administration, through all his powerful and voluminous writings, there flamed the glory of a living soul: a supreme, unquenchable, fervent soul. For him Christianity was everything; his faith inspired every action of his life, every moment of his day, every word that he uttered, every letter that he wrote. That was the real secret of his power, that drew all hearts willingly or unwillingly to him, and that gave a mystery of inspiration to his discourse. He wrote enormously, he spoke continually, he revealed his inner self in every possible way; but after his first struggles and victory every word that remains on record seems instinct with a pervading, undoubting, eager Christian faith. There was an unconscious sanctity about him which was, as it were, the breath of his nostrils; he diffused it as his breath. This is what we mean by a saint, and if ever a halo surrounded a saint it encompassed Chalmers" (Miscellanies: Literary & Historical).

An analysis of a preacher's zeal and loyalty has been estimated to be ninety-three parts impure with bigotry, personal ambition, and love of authority; and only seven parts pure zeal composed

of love to GOD and for men. Preaching is the most perilous of all vocations. We shall not find it listed in any government returns of dangerous occupations, nevertheless, it is an occupation of greatest danger - to the soul of the preacher. Here is where the conscience needs to be informed.

The difference between a sensitive conscience and a neuralgic conscience (to borrow a word from John Oman) is that a sensitive conscience is concerned only with knowing what is right; a neuralgic conscience, mainly with anxiety whether we are right. If we know that our ministry is 'a received ministry' (Acts 20:24), that will safeguard us from this deplorable intrusion of self.

We should never forget that it was the Preacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1) who confessed: "**Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**" He saw everything from "**under the sun**" and when the man of GOD is ensnared by earthly standards and temporal expedients, he loses the spacious and siderial outlook upon his vocation. Bishop Edwin H. Hughes, in *I Was Made A Minister*, has wise counsel to offer to those who lose "ministerial balance" and who are a prey to the sin of "extemporaneousness." When the rope is stretched, it sags at the centre. Our hope is not in being clever, but in spiritual enduement: "**Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts**" (Zechariah 4:6).

~ end of chapter 11 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
