

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 10 -

THE CRUX OF CRITICISM

"His ministers a flame of fire . . ." (Hebrews 1:7).

"For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." - II Corinthians 4:6.

"Now let me burn out for GOD!" - Henry Martyn.

"Nought in their heart or hand they took Save love of GOD, and holy Book." - The Moravians.

IN THEOLOGICAL STUDY there is a Higher Criticism and a Lower Criticism. The meaning and purpose of each is well known. But there is another which is more important than either. When the last word has been uttered concerning the problems of the history and literature of the redeeming revelation, there yet remains the final criticism of that same word upon the life of the reader and auditor. The Biblical literature is waiting to be read and expounded and applied to life. Disbelief and unbelief have a terrible power of arresting spiritual intelligence and hindering spiritual affluence. Doubt dims the vision and distrust dampens the spiritual fire until the pulpit loses its dynamic and ceases to be constructive and compelling. A knowledge of the philosophy, science, history, and theology of Biblical studies will be no compensation if we lack the skill to use the Book in its central truths to meet the needs of sinning souls. It may be well to study the structure of the bow and arrow, but it is more important to learn to be a good archer and hit the mark. We are to "**search the scriptures**" and "**preach the gospel**." The intake will determine the output.

By searching we shall find, and finding, we shall be able to proclaim glad tidings. The hackneyed phrase and oft-quoted injunction to "**preach the gospel**" was not meant to narrow the range of our witness by running our appeals in a rigid rut. It is inclusive of all revealed truth which bears on redemption as a divine scheme or a human experience. "He who fixes one arm of his compass in the Cross may sweep them over as wide a circle as the other arm of them will allow" (Dr. Alexander Maclaren). In this regard there is a criticism of the truth itself bearing upon our lives. GOD has given us a verifying faculty by which the truth becomes available to reason and conscience, and the Divine Spirit grants illumination of that which has been revealed and recorded as we are obedient unto the heavenly vision. It is no light thing to handle this God-breathed Word, which, in itself, is a "**discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**" (Hebrews 4:12). This is the final criticism in the Word finding us, discriminating and passing

judgment on our thoughts and judgments.

Many mistakes have been made by the minister in allowing these relative questions in study to crowd out the essential message of the Bible, and people have turned away dissatisfied. Let a man criticise himself: let him bring his study and knowledge and philosophy into the light of lights. The scrutiny of the Divine Spirit is the way of illumination upon the sacred page, and more light breaks forth. Why should we be side-tracked? Why grope in the miasma of local and time-horized things when at our hand is this universal and eternal Word adequate for our generation? Why not "find the Book" once more in a new re-reading, obedience, and devotion? The critic is easily soured and his world is out of joint: the criticized preacher under the searchlight of truth is stabilized, for he knows that he no longer squints at truth, but is a dispenser of the Divine Word, "**which liveth and abideth for ever.**" And that Word "**shall not return... void.**"

In his immortal allegory, John Bunyan depicts with spiritual illumination various aspects of the ideal ministry. Here we have Evangelist, Interpreter, Greatheart, and the Four Shepherds on the Delectable Mountains (Knowledge, Experience, Watchful, and Sincere). Consider that well-known description from the Interpreter's House:

"Christian saw the picture of:

1. A very grave person hung up against the wall; and this was the fashion:
2. Eyes lifted up to Heaven.
3. The best of books in his hand.
4. The law of truth was written upon his lips.
5. The world was behind his back.
6. He stood as if he pleaded with men.
7. A crown of gold did hang over his head."

The statue of John Bunyan at Bedford sets forth the Biblical idea of a Christian minister. His own words are inscribed on the back of the pedestal. It speaks for itself in these days of multiplied demands and interests. The speaking man is eloquent when he expounds the Book in holiness of life, pleading with evangelistic passion for the souls of men.

The preacher is counselled to read Professor James Denney's very full and searching article on "Preaching CHRIST," in the *Dictionary of CHRIST and the Gospels, Volume 2*. Here it is assumed that to preach CHRIST is the preacher's function, and the intention is to show what such preaching involved in the beginning, and what it must include still if it is to be true to its original. There must be a vital continuity or rather identity in the substance which is preached. How refreshing to find Denney underlining the most positive and pointed word, that "there is no such thing as preaching CHRIST unless it is the preaching of One who lives and reigns. If JESUS is at the right hand of GOD - if He is behind every revival of spiritual life in the Church - then He is the CHRIST, and can be preached as such; but if not, not."

Others have known something of this peril of missing the mark in their ministry. Listen to the testimonies which follow:

"I have this some time especially felt that there is something as yet unknown to me that makes my ministry less awakening than that of almost any minister, at least among my friends that have been blessed. Indeed, I have been coming to the conclusion for some time past that I have been far less use in any manner than I used formerly to hope. I see now that there is nothing which another cannot carry on exactly as I have done, and probably with much more success, for there is something in my ministry that is wanting. I feel willing now at once to depart and be with CHRIST that I may serve Him in His presence in any capacity with a perfect heart and without any secret sin, and no blight upon what I do. Or if He keeps me here, I feel that there must surely come from Himself to me some new communication of grace, some new endowment of His Spirit. I once thought of my self somewhat, and I suspect that the sorrow of want of success is in my case very much the mortification of self being thrown aside as not needed by GOD. Indeed, there is much of self in all our hours of sorrow, at least in mine." (Andrew Bonar: Diary and Letters).

"He went about his public work with awful reverence . . . In the vestry there was never any idle conversation; all was preparation of heart approaching GOD; and a short prayer preceded his entering the pulpit. Surely in going forth to speak for GOD, a man may well be overawed! When one asked him if he was never afraid of running short of sermons some day, he replied, 'No; I am just an interpreter of Scripture in my sermons; and when the Bible runs dry, then I shall.' There is a wide difference between preaching doctrine and preaching CHRIST . . . He sought to hang every vessel and flagon upon Him . . . He often expressed a dislike of the phrase, 'giving attention to religion,' because it seemed to substitute doctrine, and a devout way of thinking, for CHRIST Himself" (Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne).

"And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword: in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me; and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me" (Isaiah 49:2,6).

"There is an altar in men - a deep and majestic place where the soul transacts with its GOD, and life is cleansed and kindled with unearthly flame . . . It is the altar that makes the man" (E. Herman).

"The only business of the apostolic preacher is to make men practically realize a world unseen and spiritual; he has to rouse them not against a common enemy but against their common selves; not against natural obstacles but against spiritual foes; and he has to call out not natural resources but supernatural aids . . . Men need deliverance, not a helper merely, but a Saviour" (P. T. Forsyth).

"We need the preacher who, untrammelled by previous knowledge of his audience, shall utter the word the Lord has put into his mouth . . . It is for lack of such preaching that many a God-haunted soul does not get out of the twilight, and many a striving spirit lingers behind its destiny. To speak the word which the soul did not dream of, but which none the less it recognizes immediately as the key-word of its life, to send forth the fiery arrow of GOD that speeds straight to an unseen mark, to utter the vision, though it be as to the blind - that is the type of propheteia for lack of which whole fields ripe unto harvest remain unreaped" (E. Herman).

That spiritual experience is not a thing of the past ages, hear the witness of the recent pastor of Spurgeon's Tabernacle, London, Dr. W. Graham Scroggie, who in private, has given forth this heart-searching word:

"Will you permit me to say that I can never forget that day nearly forty years ago, and some thirteen years after my conversion, when my whole life and ministry were suddenly challenged - when it was revealed to me that I was little more than a middleman, between my books and the people - when I was given to see that I was more anxious to be a preacher than GOD's MESSENGER, that my master-passion was not the accomplishment of the will of GOD at any cost, and that my ruling motive was not the love of CHRIST.

"In that hour the edifice I had been building lay in ruins about me, and for a while all was dark despair. But, 'into the wood my Master came,' and, finding me there, in His mercy He brought me out, out into newness of life, out into fulness of service; and although I blush to think of much that lies between that hour and this, yet I gratefully bear testimony that His coming then, and in that way, has been the determining factor in my life."

Hear also Dr. G. Campbell Morgan put his finger on the pulse of ministerial efficiency before God:

"No man can go unless the Spirit call him. That is the high doctrine of the ministry; not even the Church, nor her theological halls. He must be called of the Spirit. Unless he hear that call sounding in his soul, ringing like a trumpet night and day, giving him no rest until he is compelled to say, '**Woe is me if I preach not,**' then in GOD's name let him stay where he is, in his present calling. But if he hear the call, then let him remember that it is his business to go forward within the fellowship and under the guidance of the Church" (*Commentary on The Acts*).

We believe that this definiteness and personal passion is found in the heart-knowledge of the CHRIST who is central in the preacher's message. Is not this the crux of all criticism of self?

The ministry is not a life of irresponsibility. It is one of decision, calling for action and the determination of the will. The man of the one talent in the parable took no risks and forfeited everything in doing nothing. CHRIST's man will hazard his life for the truth and the service of souls. The "why" of temptation bothers us, yet it is a mark of our worth and value that we are tempted. Our fitness and strength of character are revealed thereby, and we learn by experience. John Bunyan, in *Preface to Grace Abounding*, lights upon the inner significance and meaning of our antagonisms: "Temptations, when we meet them at first, are like the lion that roared upon Samson. But if we overcome them, the next time we see them we shall find a nest of honey within them." We might well introduce a beatitude and blessing on trouble. We should never be startled at the temptations that assail, or the trouble through which our life passes. These experiences are the predestined teachers of those deeper lessons for which men are waiting and which we can learn only by suffering and conquering.

Some of our temptations are from without, but others arise within ourselves. The ministry demands from a man his best and utmost in service. What is more natural than a healthy ambition? Thackeray says that temptation is a most obsequious servant, and will follow a man into the loneliest desert, as readily as it will follow him to church. We do not live in the desert, but within the church, and it is the hardest thing in life to say no to that which we love. If there are some temptations common to the hours of despondency and failure, there are others at the time of success and achievement. A preacher, then, is prone to think he is above the ordinary laws of ethical demands. You dare not legislate for the great "I." This passion of ambition may

easily and insidiously lead a man to the dangerous hour of the short-cut. Our Lord knew that when He was tempted with the possession of the kingdoms of the world. That was the purpose of His coming and the passion of His heart, but the self must not outstrip GOD's time and way, or else there is disaster. The will of GOD and the Cross were rightly chosen. So the minister must learn the way of identification with his Lord, denying self for selfish ends, and working on in the doing of that supreme will at all costs.

We need to guard the "self-life" with sedulous scrutiny, watching against the peril of egoism and hypocrisy. There is a saying that the devil has his opportunity when there is an unstable equilibrium. We need to forget ourselves in dedication to CHRIST and His service, that with resolution we shall go forward as "**seeing him who is invisible.**" That is the secret of endurance and our best. The wise corrective and antidote is to know that our life and work are known to The Presence in the Midst. Our PRIEST KING (Revelation 1:13) is in the midst of the churches, marking what is passing in each community and holding in His hand those who are His messengers at His disposal and will. That is the picture of the true man of GOD. The intimate knowledge of the CHRIST is revealed and that eye of flame detects whatever is wanting or amiss, the sharp two-edged sword falls heavily on all insincerity, indolence, impurity - on every error, whether of doctrine or of life.

Thank GOD for the sovereignty of His love, tender and gracious, that we repent and do the first works if our love has lost the zeal of the first! This is the crux of our need, self-criticism before word-criticism, and CHRIST is the crux of criticism!

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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