

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 7 -

THE SNARE OF SUBSTITUTES

Carlyle said to Emerson as they walked on the moors about Craigenputtock, "CHRIST died upon the Tree; that built Dunscore Kirk yonder; ay - and it has wrought results of more enduring moment. It is the secret of all that is noblest in the world of to-day, since it is for this cause that men and women are living not to themselves, but to him who died for them and rose again."

"Man must and will have some religion; if he has not the religion of JESUS, he will have the religion of Satan, and will erect a synagogue of Satan."

- William Blake.

MODERN LIFE has produced a plethora of substitute foods. No longer does civilization depend entirely upon the natural products of nature. Scientists have devised ways and means of sustaining life by other chemical combinations. So margarine may displace butter, alcohol from wood-pulp serves for power, and synthetic chemical planning gives to man that which is sufficient for his needs (for a time at least!) when natural sources are short or denied or curtailed by war. Similarly, in the work of the ministry there is the danger of the substitute and the counterfeit for that which is staple and genuine. There are "**clouds... without water**" (Jude 12).

The Old Testament provides a story concerning this snare. We read in 1 Kings 14:26, "**Shishak... took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. And king Rehoboam made in their stead brassen shields.**" The bitter irony of the record of the Hebrew historian lies in the parade of the counterfeit, the pomp and ceremony sealing imitations. King Solomon made three hundred shields of gold (1 Kings 10:17), and in comparison with that magnificence, brass is cheap and tawdry. The casual glance might imagine the appearance to be the same, but the substance is changed. Truly, "all is not gold that glitters." Brass instead of gold may be a utility to some, but it is a sign of a lesser value, a debasing of the higher ideal, a cheap substitute for the best.

In the minister's life before GOD and his fellows, there is this knavery and deception if a man is not watchful in his thinking and devotion. In INDIVIDUAL experience these shields are but symbols. When the golden shields of simplicity, purity, truthfulness, love, and reverence are taken away, how great is the fall of that life. It is sadly possible to become unnatural, clever, impure, irreverent, soured, and we become as brass! Deterioration always follows spiritual lapse and backsliding. Then the song dies away, the heart-felt testimony is silenced, fires burn low,

zeal is quenched, and the preacher becomes apologetic and excusing instead of speaking with holy boldness. It is sin which reduces the fine gold to brass. It is surprising how people prefer the latter. A few years ago in the Board of Trade returns in Great Britain there was a note about the increase from abroad of imitation jewelry, the reason being that it was cheaper. So tinsel is preferred or tolerated to that which is redolent of glory and nobility. Let a nation go off the gold standard and there is a period of depression. In like manner, the lowering of ideals, the compromise of divine principles, produces the cheaper presentation of Christianity by GOD's servants. This trap is always athwart the steps of the minister of truth, dealing, as he does, with the sacred and holy.

The particular pitfall in the ministry is in a man's INTERPRETATION OF CHRIST. Here is the crux of criticism and the focus of faith. Devious are the ways in which the CHRIST has been set forth in our generation. The One who said He would draw men unto Himself implied that this was the result of a lifting up. That He has been lifted up out of the earth into glory and enthroned majesty is a tenet of truth. At the same time we know that He must be exalted, lifted up, in a preacher's life and preaching. But what if the preacher fails in that most blessed of all ministries? What if he is enmeshed in the nets of doubt and denial, allied to a spurious ecclesiastical superiority? The pew does not thrive on negations or question marks. A ministry of make-believe is evident when a man speaks only of the Teacher, the Example, the Ideal, the Man. These are descriptions in the unveiling of the CHRIST, but an emphasis upon humanity without Deity is a substitute of brass for gold.

A well-known theological professor of this generation tells us, in effect, "that literary and historical research leads us to conclude that JESUS was the Great Venturer. He was, of course, a courageous reformer and a thorough going rebel and patriotism naturally killed Him" (?). But such an explanation of the crucial and central act of His life does not explain or set out the death of CHRIST in the light as Christian believers see it. The gold of Deity and Saviourhood is surely found in the New Testament literature, as typified in that first annunciation: "**Thou shalt call his name JESUS, for he shall save his people from their sins.**" The death of CHRIST was not that of a martyr; neither was it accidental nor that of a criminal; it was not that of a suicide but a voluntary death, yet to think of it as an example merely does not exhaust the meaning of New Testament teaching. The only adequate interpretation of the death of CHRIST in the prime of life is that it was a SACRIFICE. "**Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**" (I Corinthians 15:1-3). Read the verdict of James Denney, in *The Death of CHRIST* (p. 302):

"We may begin as wisely as we please with those who have a prejudice against it, or whose conscience is asleep, or who have much to learn both about CHRIST and about themselves; before they will consent to look at such a gospel, to say nothing of abandoning themselves to it; but if we do not begin with something which is essentially related to the Atonement, presupposing it or presupposed by it or involved in it, something which leads inevitably, though it may be by an indirect and unsuspected route, to the Lamb of GOD that taketh away the sin of the world, we have not begun to preach the Gospel at all."

Occasionally the man in the pulpit is tricked into a debasing of Christological values. He may substitute human attainment as necessary for sinning man instead of divine Atonement. The philosophy of the school men is not the last word in the sphere of human sinning. There is a philosophy of GOD and the world in which CHRIST incarnate is central with His Cross at the heart of all things. He is not to be accounted for by human categories in the light of that standard

and the achieving of man's redemption. There is no substitute for The Substitute. Because the "acids of modernity" have interwoven themselves with our common life and thinking there is no occasion to adulterate the eternal truth in CHRIST by substitutes. "**The blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords: who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light . . .**" (I Timothy 6:15, 16) is a description of infinite majesty not to be circumvented by foisting upon a needy world a cheapened or second-rate scheme of what man himself might attempt in order to lift himself up out of the bondage of sin and self.

Again, it is easy to make too much of the letter and miss the spirit in the INVITATION to the Christian life. To many workers in the ranks of Christendom the forms, ceremonies, ritual, are everything. Conformity to these may have a legitimate place according to the branch of the organized Church to which a person belongs, but these in themselves should not take the place of the essential spiritual experience of grace. A tradition of the elders imposing the dead hand of a hoary past may cripple the work of GOD's SPIRIT in the present. CHRIST is first before the Church, and righteousness is greater than ritual. The preacher's peril is that he is caught in the machinery, excelling in mechanics and all the time missing the dynamics of Spirit-filled Christianity.

Or we may preach and teach so as to give the impression that we are more concerned with a humanism in religion instead of a divine revelation. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, points out that "it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of GOD, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself." The humanism of the sixteenth century was a wise corrective in that age, but much of the humanism of to-day is simply the deification and worship of man instead of GOD. It finds expression in some quarters in the exalting of the State or a national Leader to a super-position of reverence. As in Calvin's point of view, so in the preacher's now, we dare not succumb to the snare of allowing this particular way of, and attitude to, life buttress man's thinking as though he could work out his own salvation apart from GOD. A view of man as a late development in primeval history to become the centre of everything is too often the dismissal of GOD to the circumference of life, especially when man is self-satisfied with his achievements in science, education, invention, or culture. A humanism cradled in a materialistic philosophy of life is a poor substitute for that view of man which the Bible reveals. Revelation postulates the greatness and dignity of man because he is made in the image and after the likeness of the Eternal, but we now view man amidst the ruins of his fallen state. And the present hour in history is evidence enough of how man himself is a failure, with all his boasted advance, in his lawlessness, and prides, and the throwing off of moral and sacred restraints. Emil Brunner, in *The Mediator*, says:

"A man does not only do wrong, but he is bad, he is a sinner. A sinner is not a being who has sinned a number of times: he is a human being who sins, whatever he is doing. So long as this is not perceived the gravity of sin is ignored, and the point of view remains superficial."

Let the preacher beware lest he lose this Biblical conception of man, for in that alone is the challenge and urge to proffer a remedy at once efficacious and divine!

In any view of life which pretends to deal with the great deeps of personality, no word is more overworked than that of "realism." In fiction, art, poetry, drama, and philosophy, this is the trend

of emphasis. But what is its connotation apart from the preacher's moral and spiritual vantage-point? Realism in the imagination of certain novelists seems to be that the emphasis placed on describing certain ugly facts of life more revoltingly, more nauseatingly than is warranted. The result has been an impression that those voices were out of touch with reality. Those things are not the whole of life, and there are more heroines and heroes, more noble and beautiful lives lived in real life than are so described. Self-indulgence instead of self-discipline is brass for gold, and the man of GOD must meet that challenge as it corrodes youthful and middle-aged thinking.

The realism of the greatest drama ever staged is preferable for exposition to the worship at these baser and lesser shrines. Our faith is not a comparative religion to be placed alongside any of these others: Christianity is the only, the unique, way of life, and

"There is a Way for man to rise
To that sublime abode:-
An offering and a sacrifice,
A HOLY SPIRIT's energies,
And Advocate with GOD:

"These, these prepare us for the sight
Of holiness above;
The sons of ignorance and night
May dwell in the eternal Light,
Through the eternal Love."

Then, religious profession may take the place of a genuine Christian dedication. In that time of substitution, referred to already, we read (1 Kings 14:28) that "**And it was so, when the king went into the house of the LORD, that the guard bare them, and brought them back into the guard chamber.**" As if everything were the same as before! This is the danger of unreality in worship or prayer or devotion. The hypocrite is manufactured from the holy person who keeps up a show. The nominal decent man of to-day does not object to longer hours for his entertainment, but he demands the shortest hour possible for worship!

A minister is tempted to conform to the spirit of the age too much, for, like worshippers, he, too, is in peril from the formalities of church worship. Our prayers - how easy it is to lose the sense of urgency and awe, and become gramophones grinding out some formula. Our preaching - how truly we can degenerate into echoes of other men's thoughts and sermons, and no longer speak with the unction and authority of one who has come from the presence of GOD. When the message is no longer Bible-centred and Christ-filled, and lacks something of sacrificial Cross-bearing, how it can misfire! And an arid orthodoxy of speech and creed about fundamentals is a poor brass substitute when it is cold and lacks spiritual life and warmth. Then we are dead!

It is here that the Bible is crucial. There has been a tendency to "huckster" the Word of GOD. Paul says that "**we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ**" (II Corinthians 2:17). This reference to the ministry of the Gospel brings under review the adulteration of truth in order to make dishonest gain. Closely allied to this idea of the peddler in contrast with the true merchant in the "**handling... deceitfully**" (II Corinthians 4:2). Why is a minister tempted to do this? Perhaps

from poverty of material. Instead of reverently studying the Bible until its riches are unfolded to him, he mixes it with foreign material until he destroys its purity. This is degrading, even as it depreciates the nutritive qualities of that which is offered to the hearers. And in deceiving the people there is a corruption of the honesty of the preacher. But the sincerity spoken of is that which can bear the exposure of intense light, and indicates a moral and spiritual and even intellectual state, in which it is possible to bear searching investigation - **"truth in the inward parts"** - absolute genuineness. The spurious and the genuine are detected as time passes, and **"the day shall declare it . . . of what sort it (our work) is."**

Dr. John A. Hutton, Editor of *The British Weekly*, has pertinently written:

"Recently there has been a shyness towards the Old Testament which may have had one of its sources in sheer laziness, and an insolence towards the Old Testament which must rest upon sheer ignorance. Here, as elsewhere, the true enemies are those of the household."

The preacher of "substitutes" has been hard put to empty much of the Biblical literature of its glory and worth by re-editing it to suit a hypothesis. Such cleverness has found a reward in the decay of faith and the loss of hunger for the Bible when it is viewed solely as a book of earthly dimensions. And there is also a bibliolatry which is a hindrance as well as the worship of the critical judgment of the human spirit.

We need sane, balanced, spiritually enlightened interpretation of the Word of GOD. Away with the second-rate method of handling this sublime revelation which is made in life and set in literature for all to read and understand. The Bible, after all, is its own best interpreter. Scholarship can do much for the elucidation of the Book; but imagination and faith wedded to literary receptivity can do more. The preacher can overcome this temptation by treating the Bible as a spiritual unity, which it is, and by expounding its message inculcate a love for it on the part of his auditors. Best of all, as men discover the preacher's own personal love for it, and his devotion to the CHRIST who is revealed therein, they will ask for more and yet more of **'the unsearchable riches.'**

Every pastor knows the subtle indictment to his own heart of assuming that social reform is a better way than personal conversion. An example of how leaders and preachers are befogged in an issue is found in the recent conferences concerning a post-war settlement and why we must resist the ghastly terror which stalks openly across the world in totalitarian dress. Let that influential Protestant Theologian, Karl Barth, speak in his pronouncement, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*:

"I have been struck, on my side, by the fact that in your pronouncements various other conceptions have been put forward as primary and ultimate reasons - such as 'Western civilization,' 'the liberty of the individual,' 'freedom of knowledge,' 'the infinite value of the human personality,' 'the brotherhood of man,' 'social justice,' etc . . . The ultimate reason which I put forward for the necessity of resisting Hitler was simply the Resurrection of JESUS CHRIST . . . Our resistance will be built on a really sure foundation only when we resist unequivocally in the name of peculiarly Christian truth, unequivocally in the name of JESUS CHRIST."

How easy to be side-tracked in our thinking and preaching with those things which must issue

through redeemed lives if only the pulpit would be faithful to those central affirmations of the historic faith.

The trend of the times is always emphasizing the improvement of conditions and the betterment of life through environmental change. No one objects to these things: we believe in them, and they follow the dynamic of the challenge of the Gospel, but how hollow-sounding they are if no new man is created. Some preachers are side-tracked through a social application of truth and by political alliances. A plague on both substitutes should be the attitude of the man of GOD! There is no substitute for the re-created life, the regenerated heart. Otherwise there is an emasculated Christian Gospel.

Much religion to-day is religious but not necessarily Christian. "**Ye must be born again,**" is a categorical imperative of the Kingdom of GOD. Moral endeavour is commendable but spiritual enlightenment is convincing. The preacher dare not trifle with truth, if he is truly CHRIST's servant, for to suggest any other hope for man to build upon than JESUS CHRIST's righteousness is a vain hope. The fine gold of that divine standard is sufficient for every man's need, and it is our aim to PREACH CHRIST, "**warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus**" (Colossians 1:27, 28). There is our task and the dignity of our calling and labour. Let us beware lest we are ensnared from the central affirmations of our Gospel and preaching. We labour and preach for a verdict from the individual. We do not read essays or discourse on the subtleties of philosophy or chatter lightly about the current events of the day: we are engaged in a great task of showing man his sinnerhood in order to bring to him the Saviourhood of JESUS CHRIST, and so we plead a worthy cause as ambassadors of GOD, beseeching men to be "**reconciled to GOD,**" thereby to enjoy his sainthood.

One of the lost arts of the pulpit is that of penitential preaching. In the days of Bunyan and also of Thomas Boston (who writes on *The Art of Man-Fishing; The Crook and the Lot*) we learn much about it. Close and bold preaching coming home to the conscience "to terrify the godly in their too easy and too presuming way with GOD and with themselves, preaching fitted to keep a sinner once penitent always penitent, preaching that makes the holy law of GOD to enter deeper every day into the deceitful and corrupt and wicked heart; life-searching, heart-searching, conscience-searching preaching," so far as can be gathered from the sermons advertised or published among us, is all but a lost art. There is intellectual acumen; there is Biblical and other scholarship, eloquence, and great earnestness, of a kind; but preaching to the heart and conscience is the neglected divine art.

Alexander Whyte says of John Bunyan that he felt a fool and an unworthy wretch that he should preach. And then as to his literature: "To the end they never made Bunyan a Dr. of Divinity nor anything else of that honourable sort. But three degrees had already been granted to him that neither Cambridge nor Oxford could either give or withhold. 'To wit, union with CHRIST; the anointing of the Spirit; and much experience of temptation.' All of which go to fit a man for that mighty work of preaching the Gospel of CHRIST, much more than all the University learning that can be had." So says John Burton of Bedford in his excellently written preface to John Bunyan's *Gospel Truths Opened*.

Fraser of Brea in Scotland says: "The preacher must have a sense of his charge; the danger of

immortal souls deeply imprinted on his heart. He that hath but slight impressions of his charge will never faithfully perform it."

Bunyan speaks: "Wherefore I did labour so to preach the Word, as that thereby, if it were possible, the sin, and the person guilty of the sin, might be particularized by my preaching." "The Lord," says Halyburton, "did point out to me particulars wherewith to try me. But when I saw that it behooved me to quit these particular sins, then I begged a little delay: Augustine-like, I was willing to be pure, but not yet." And, like Bunyan, out of that experience Halyburton, in his pulpit particularizations, was very home-coming and very heart-searching. And he was wont to complain that most preachers were much too general and much too remote in their application of truth. And Fraser says on the same subject: "I felt called to preach plainly, particularly, and authoritatively; yet courteously, wisely, meekly, and gently; not to speak in a cloud of words, but to say; **"Thou art the man!"**"

There is much more from Bunyan concerning preaching in his Grace Abounding - how the tempter suggests and says, when he was about to preach upon a smart and searching portion of the Word, that he should not do so when he was himself guilty. Or the temptation to mince it down or water down that living Word.

If this be true, then we are not free from the temptation to replace gold with brass in our thinking and preaching. Ours is a calling demanding the highest and the best: we should not be surprised if this temptation does not beset us constantly. It may not be a sin at first glance, hence its insidious danger and peril if we dally with it. BUT it is that **"sin which doth so easily beset us,"** having weights to drag us back from those golden heights of spiritual redemption. Its clinging folds wrap loosely around us like a garment to trip us up. So, Christian man, **"run . . . looking unto JESUS the author and finisher of our faith."**

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