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## What are the Qualifications of a Gospel Minister?

**A**N attempt to answer this question was made by the Rev. William Staughton, D.D., in the Circular letter accompanying the Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1807.<sup>1</sup> Born on January 4th, 1770, at Coventry he died on December 12th, 1829, in Washington, DC., in America.<sup>2</sup> He entered Bristol Academy in 1791<sup>3</sup> from the Cannon Street Church in Birmingham, where he had been baptized by the "seraphic Pearce."<sup>4</sup> He showed considerable talent as a young preacher in the Bristol area, and was eventually chosen by the College Lane Church, Northampton, to succeed Ryland<sup>5</sup> but he declined on the grounds of ill-health. The College Lane minute book, however, shrewdly comments "it was well known and more privately acknowledged that his refusal was wholly owing to an unhappy entanglement."<sup>6</sup> In 1793 he went to America, settling in Charleston, South Carolina, having been strongly recommended for the post by Rippon. Rippon wrote to Dr. Furman, "Give me leave to observe that you must not expect Mr. Staughton to be a fair sample of our English brethren in the ministry. You may be certain that he is far above par . . ." <sup>7</sup>

Staughton was the "Anon" who subscribed half a guinea in the original list of subscribers to the Missionary Society, "thanking his lucky stars that he was there, but, true to studentdom, moneyless, even after his five Sundays 'supplying' College Lane." He had to borrow his half-guinea. In after years he used to say, "I rejoice over that half-guinea more than over all I have given in my life besides." As just a bird of passage he modestly withheld his signature.<sup>8</sup> Staughton may have withheld his signature, but he did not withhold his zeal for the missionary endeavour, and in America it was largely his drive and enthusiasm which led to the foundation of the American Board of Foreign Missions. He was the first corresponding secretary of the Board, and played the part of Fuller to Judson's Carey. It is to be regretted that all correspondence between Judson and Staughton "perished by shipwreck of a vessel on passage from Philadelphia to Washington."<sup>9</sup>

The rest of his life was spent in America, his main work being in Philadelphia where he was minister of Sansom Street Baptist Church. While there he started an Academy in his own home,

training many men for the ministry. Eventually the Academy became the theological department of the Columbian College, and Staughton was the first President of the College in Washington, DC.<sup>10</sup> Staughton was a noted preacher in his day and his ministry was much blessed. The Revs. Cox and Hoby in an account of their tour of the States for the Baptist Union in 1836 give a glowing account of his preaching ability. "Many others spoke of the discourses which they had occasionally heard, as if his tones were yet thrilling in their ears, and his impressive manner still fixing their attention. In the families he visited, in the pulpits he occupied, in the public institutions he founded or adorned 'being dead, he yet speaketh' . . . His memory will not soon fade away: and . . . a far distant posterity to whom his fame shall be transmitted is likely to reap the benefit, when his contemporaries have followed him to the dust, and even when the recording tablet shall have perished."<sup>11</sup>

In the Circular Letter of 1807 Staughton left to posterity his views on the required qualifications of a Gospel Minister. It makes interesting reading and gives us an insight into the mind of a man who spent most of his life training men for the ministry, and the principles on which he based their selection for that training. If the same standards were applied to many ministerial candidates today, the candidates and the committees that interview would experience some heart-searching.

### **The minor issues dealt with briefly**

Staughton begins by clearing the ground before launching into his main theme, dealing with "some things regarded as qualifications but which in reality are not."<sup>12</sup>

"We need not prove to you that mere morality of character, powers of eloquence, or heirships to livings are sufficient: a heathen or an infidel may possess them all. But it is necessary to state that:

1. A persuasion in the mind of the subject himself is no genuine proof . . . Most young Christians, brought up out of the horrible pit and taught the excellency of Jesus, feel ardent to proclaim his character to thousands. This anxiety for the salvation of sinners is lovely as a fruit of the work of God in the heart. It designates the saint, but not the preacher.
2. The confident decisions of friends and relatives are not to be trusted . . . Many a fond parent, like the mother of the sons of Zebedee, has wished a child exalted in the service of Christ, without observing the mixture of the motives which govern the heart. To long earnestly that a son or a friend may glorify God in the work of the ministry, is an effect of

grace, while the sentiment we form of his ability may be nothing but nature.

3. Success is no satisfactory proof that a preacher is qualified of God. God has said, "My word that goeth forth out of my mouth shall not return unto me void." This glorious word, therefore, may be quick and powerful though the preacher be held in bonds of iniquity."

Subjectivism, the admiration of friends, and an outward success are not regarded as criteria in this matter by Staughton. Following this he turns his attention to some things which are "often supposed to disqualify but do not."

1. A deep persuasion of our entire unworthiness . . . Self-abasement will aid rather than hinder the work of God. It will trample under-foot the serpent pride, and cast the crown at the feet of Jesus.
2. Great fear and trembling in prospect of the service, should not lead to the conclusion that requisite qualifications are not possessed. When we reflect on the solemnity of the work, and on the awful responsibility of the minister of God we may wonder the dread of the soul is no greater . . . Holy fear is useful and not injurious when it leads to greater faithfulness in the ministry, and to a more entire reliance on the Lord for his assistance.
3. The neglect, or even the contempt of many who profess the name of Christ, does not prove that we ought not to gird up the loins for the labours of a steward . . . But he who condemns a Christian minister possessing only two talents, because he equals not another possessing ten, should fear lest He see it and be angry, who hath said, "Whoso despiseth you despiseth me."
4. The discovery of no immediate or great success should not lead any of God's servants to conclude he has never been called to his Master's work . . . A minister is no adequate judge of his usefulness."

Once again Staughton stands firm against that subjectivism which leads to despair. It seems that the ministry was liable to the same dangers then as today. There are still those who scorn the two-talent man and amid the indifference and materialism of the twentieth century those who minister have to remind themselves constantly they are no judges of their own usefulness.

### The Four Essentials

The qualifications for a gospel minister he divides into two types. The essential, without which a man cannot be called a minister,

and the contributory, or those which "tend to adorn, assist, and complete the character."

1. Godliness is requisite. Under the term we include holiness of heart and purity of life . . . What indeed can be expected from an unconverted ministry? How can an ungodly preacher illustrate the excellency of the divine character which his heart abhors, or the glories of a law he loves to violate? . . . But the root of the matter is not all—the verdure and fruit of a holy conversation are also required . . . He must take heed to himself, his flock, and his doctrine. Hence,
2. Knowledge is requisite. The new man is renewed in knowledge: but spiritual understanding is progressive, and in this it is required that a minister of the Word abound . . . "The priests' lips should keep knowledge and they should seek the Law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts." As if God had said should the Bible be not at hand, the mouth of the priest will supply its absence . . . To obtain the precise degree of spiritual information necessary in a candidate for the ministry is scarcely possible. It seems, however, requisite that he should possess general views on the plan of salvation, of the doctrine of grace, and "the law of the House of the Lord."
3. An aptness to teach is requisite. It consists in a readiness to communicate "the good treasures of the heart" to others. "The well spring of wisdom is a flowing brook" . . . Now the qualification we speak of is like a passage through a wall: it is called a door of utterance to speak "the mystery of Christ" . . . It includes an ardent love for the souls of men, holy diligence, a fulness of ideas, a vigorous memory, and a flowing elocution.
- 4 There must be a divine call . . . Christ displays his sovereignty in calling to office whomsoever he pleases. His call is delivered not by visiting angels. It is not heard from the flame of a bush, nor from the lightning and clouds of a trembling mountain; nor is it an audible address from our Lord Jesus Christ . . . It is the still voice of God in the soul saying, "Occupy till I come." The subject feels a necessity laid upon him: a dispensation of the gospel committed unto him. The souls of men appear of greater value than he had before conceived—already he begins to travail in birth . . . He would rather be a preacher of Christ than a master of all the mines in the world. In his countenance, in his converse, in his prayer, in his exhortations, his exercises discover themselves. At length they engage the attention of the Church of God."

There are several points of interest here. Notice how much emphasis Staughton puts upon personal holiness; or godliness as he terms it. This living out of the spiritual life, and progress in spiritual knowledge, will be the two factors which ensure that a man will "take heed to himself, his flock, and his doctrine." Lest this should be interpreted in too subjective a manner he makes the final point quite clear, that ultimately the work of the ministry is grounded in a divine call, without which all else is of no account. Subjectivism is to be eliminated at all costs.

A further interesting fact is that in paragraph 2, he can conceive that a man in the pastoral office is capable of speaking the Word of God, even though he had not the Bible. Once again we see the importance of personal holiness in the life of the minister, as far as Staughton was concerned. Though himself admitting the difficulty of obtaining precise "spiritual information," he says that every candidate should "possess general views of the plan of salvation, of the doctrine of grace, and the 'law of the house of God'." One wonders how many men coming forward for the work of the ministry today have been given such instruction at the time of their baptism, or subsequently. Is it really the task of our colleges to give such instruction in matters of doctrine, or should this be the task of each minister in his own church? It is often said there are not enough jobs for the young church members. Perhaps we ought to think less in terms of what can we give them to do, and more in terms of what can we teach them further concerning the faith.

A final point of interest is, that in the fourth paragraph Staughton makes it quite clear that the voice of God is not heard in the sensational experience, but in the certain conviction of the heart that God is calling us to his work. Once again, however, this is not allowed to lead to subjectivism, but it engages "the attention of the Church."

### **"The Furniture of the Mind and the Affections of the Heart."**

Staughton concludes his discourse on the qualifications of a gospel minister by mentioning some matters he considers of secondary importance. Acknowledging that the Apostles were only fishermen, he says, concerning the "furniture of the mind":

"We are sensible that an ostentation of learning may be food for a weak and aspiring mind. Nevertheless as knowledge of almost every kind may be useful to a gospel minister; as in the Bible we have only a translation, behind the veil of which many a beauty is concealed; as we have no reason to expect that extraordinary assistance which the apostles enjoyed, and as education places a

minister of the gospel on equal ground with a learned adversary, to seek an acquaintance with language, history, and other similar studies, whence it can be accomplished, is praiseworthy."

The "affections of the heart" he sees in terms of being "clothed with humility" before the flock. "If he must be the greatest of all he will acquire the elevation by becoming the servant of all!" Willingness to suffer adversity, prudence, true sympathy with human joys and sorrows, he views as further suitable qualifications of a gospel minister. His final plea in the letter is that the brethren will pray for their ministers, and that labourers may be sent into the great harvest-field.

Staughton, though neglected by his posterity,<sup>13</sup> raises in this Circular Letter an important issue. The Letter was written at the express wish of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, and was published by them in 1807, with the full approval of the delegates assembled. It was presumably read in many churches of the Association, and was also sent to other Associations for their perusal. Thus in the Churches, through the medium of this letter, the clear demands of the ministry were set forth for all to hear. It meant that many in the churches would be challenged to think of the call to the ministry and what it involved. We might well ask ourselves today, with so many men leaving the ministry for other posts, who is responsible for putting these claims before the members of our churches. Is it sufficient to leave this matter to the individual, without offering any help or guidance? If not, who should give this guidance: the minister of the local church? Or is it the responsibility of the Association? What part should the Baptist Colleges take in this matter: should they advertize? Inevitably we must ask ourselves what part the Baptist Union, which issues an accredited list of ministers regularly, should play in the task of making known the "qualifications of a Gospel Minister.?"

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707-1807*. Edited by A. D. Gilette. Publ. American Baptist Publishing Society, 118 Arch Street, Philadelphia (1851), pp. 440-444.

<sup>2</sup> S. W. Lynd, *Memoir of Rev. William Staughton, D.D.* Publ. Boston: Lincoln, Edmands & Co., and Hubbard & Edmands, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1834.

<sup>3</sup> S. A. Swaine, *Faithful Men: Memorials of Bristol Baptist College and some of its distinguished Alumni*. Publ. London: Alexander & Shephard, Holborn, 1884, pp. 182-184.

<sup>4</sup> *Northamptonshire Biographies*. Publ. Taylor & Son, Northampton, 1901, No. 27, p. 2. Also Swaine, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Letter dated March 24th, 1793 from College Lane. *Biographies*, No. 27, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Quote from College Lane Minute Book, *Biographies*, No. 27, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Letter quoted in *Biographies*, No. 27, p. 5. Also in Lynd.

<sup>8</sup> *William Carey* by S. P. Carey. Publ. Hodder & Stoughton, 1923 (7th Edition), p. 92. Also *Biographies*, No. 27, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.* Two Volumes. Publ. London: Nisbet, 1853. Note in the Preface.

<sup>10</sup> Lynd, *Biographies*.

<sup>11</sup> Cox and Hoby, *Baptists in America: a narrative of the Deputation from the Baptist Union in England to the United States and Canada*. Publ. London: T. Ward & Co., pp. 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> All quotations ensuing are from the Circular Letter—see note 1 above.

<sup>13</sup> The Rev. E. C. Starr (American Baptist Historical Society) in a recent letter confirmed that no extensive work has been carried out on Staughton since Lynd in 1834.

Letters from Staughton appear in the *Baptist Magazine* and *Rippon's Register*.

*Baptist Magazine*, Vol. 2, p. 495. Vol. 5, pp. 83-84—Letters to Ivimey.

Vol. 7, p. 349—News of American Association.

Vol. 8, p. 171—Concerning sailing of Mr. & Mrs. G. Hough and Mrs. Charlotte White.

p. 298—Letter to Rippon.

Vol. 9, p. 233—Concerning the Conversion of Spencer Cone (Actor).

p. 388—Proceedings of the General Convention in America, and report of Baptist Board of foreign missions in U.S.A.

Vol. 10, p. 310—Letters from Carey, Ward, and Morrison to W.S.

Vol. 13, p. 73—Letter to Ivimey about Washington Theological Semny. and Judson's trials in Burma.

Vol. 15, p. 402—Extract of letter to Mr. Dyer.

*Rippon's Register*, Vol. 3, p. 121—Letter from Bordentown concerning fever in New York. Also mentions details of the Bordentown Academy.

p. 148—An account of his ordination—in more detail than in Lynd, pp. 42, 43.

p. 267 Letter regretting the passing of Pearce.

p. 293—His Circular Letter for 1801, *The Divine Origin of the Gospel*, published in full.

p. 535—Concluding address by W.S. to Philadelphia Missionary Society. No date. About 1800-1801.

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