

The Relevance of the Ministry.¹

OF all callings the Christian ministry is perhaps the most paradoxical, for it requires the possession of qualities which are commonly regarded as opposites. The effective minister must learn to employ all his personality, and yet understand self-suppression; he must be introspective to an unusual degree, exploring his own soul that he may learn the approach to the inner life of other men, yet he must never cease to be completely healthy-minded. His people expect him to be both a mystic and a jolly good fellow.

In view of the importance, difficulty and strangeness of our task it is no wonder that a vast literature has grown up about it, and it is significant that in almost every book on Pastoral Theology there is an emphatic assertion of the necessity and worth of the preacher's office. At least one section will be found in these books discussing the question whether the ministry has any right to exist in this utilitarian age. Is there any parallel with that in the technical literature of other professions? I once studied certain legal text-books, but cannot recollect any hint in them of a timid misgiving about the usefulness of the legal profession. The late Lord Birkenhead never seems to have been visited with any modest diffidence as to whether lawyers are really indispensable. Similarly, when doctors write about their work they never raise a doubt as to its importance; no one seems to have suggested to them that they are an unnecessary survival from the past. The validity, worth and relevance of these callings is universally admitted; why should the ministry be perplexed by the problem of its relevance to the modern world?

If any one is inclined to question the existence of such a perplexity, I can only refer to personal experience. I used to feel that there was an actuality in other callings, which was absent from my own. The physician deals with the unchallengeable reality of pain, but the maladies with which we deal are less obvious. The lawyer is concerned with tangible property, with undeniable rights and duties; the preacher has to do with possessions and duties in the realm of the invisible. Moreover, the results of these other callings can be immediately assessed and accurately gauged. There is an answer to all this, but until

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the minister finds it his work is far less effective than it might be. I am not thinking of cases where this doubt arises from uncertainty as to the gospel message; where that is the explanation, the only thing is to pray, "Lord, increase our faith." I have rather in mind the situation where the minister is sure of his faith, but cannot relate its great matters to the trivial details and routine duties of each day.

Even if this disastrous feeling of irrelevance never disturbs our own minds, the outer world thus views us. It is easy to say we should pay no attention to its verdict, but as long as men deem our witness superfluous we work to no purpose. We are regarded as men who advocate inappropriate remedies for imaginary dangers. Dr. Johnson said of someone, "He would cry, Fire! Fire! in Noah's flood." Caustic critics sometimes depict the ministry as if it were equally ineffective and out of touch with reality. "The world needs economic guidance," they say, "and you talk about sin." Of course, we have our answer, but are they convinced?

In so far as this is the objection of unbelieving people, we must reckon with the fact that our work will always appear to them unreal and futile. When they do praise the ministry, they commonly do so on wrong grounds, and we appeal from their verdict to a higher tribunal. Paul has repeated references to the difficulty of making his message appear reasonable to prejudice and disbelief; compare such utterances as 1 Cor. i. 18, 21-25; ii. 14-16. It is as if, with a kind of despair, he says, "I can't make them understand, do what I will." Are we prepared for this kind of misunderstanding, to be regarded as queer problems, "fools for Christ's sake"? The ancient prestige of the ministerial office has largely gone; since it was to some extent based on wrong reasons, it is perhaps well it should go—but we are left to face an uncomprehending world with an apparently irrelevant message. What shall we do?

To begin with, we must deal with ourselves, and seek the continual deepening of our faith. Is our Gospel relevant to our own needs? If so, it cannot be entirely without reference to another man's problem. Insist upon it to your own soul that you are commanded and commissioned for your task, and win the strength that comes from the conception of your work as duty. Above all things, do not seek a spurious relevance by turning aside to discuss "the book of the month" or current topics of interest. Of course, if there is anything which you are convinced is unrelated to human need, it must be scrapped, but we shall need to be sure about it, and it will be well to remember that the Church needs to conserve the wisdom of all the ages.

That word "Church" leads me to say that the only true view of the ministry is gained when it is seen in relation to the Church, and that much of the seeming unreality of our task arises from the fact that we do not set it against this, its only appropriate background. Viewed in reference to the gathering and retaining of an audience, our methods stand condemned as utterly impracticable; neither the things we do nor the things we say are impressively sensible—if our aim is merely to attract listeners. And in relation to the acquisitive, competitive society which surrounds us, the ministry cannot be rightly judged; it is out of focus; it is in a wrong context, and those who apply the standards of such a society will always deem us unbusiness-like. We gain the right viewpoint when we regard the ministry in relation to the Church, calling in the new and real world to redress the balance of the old.

Is not this a day when we ought to think more, and more deeply, about the Church and its fellowship? I am not speaking now of controversies about Church order and government. In those contentings Canon Streeter holds that "everybody has won and all shall have prizes." Perhaps so, but what sort of prizes do we want? Victory in a disputation, or the growth of real Churches? Conformity to the New Testament pattern, or possession of the New Testament spirit? Churches are made Churches, not by the correctness of their constitution and government, but by their having the marks of love for Christ and godly concord with one another. The minister's task is not only to attract an audience, nor merely to instruct a company of disciples; he is appointed by Christ to gather, guard and develop a fellowship. Christ creates that fellowship, but under Christ the minister is the formative influence. This is not to deprecate preaching, in any sense; it will never cease to be important, supremely important, but preaching itself is largely conditioned by the state of Church fellowship.

All this is relevant to present-day problems. It is a commonplace to speak of Europe's inability to transcend the boundaries of race and self-interest. The Church ought to be a continual, victorious example of that. Coleridge said, "The Church is, in idea, the only pure democracy." Many experiments in the re-fashioning of the State are suggested to-day. Why should not Christian Churches give the required lesson? One expositor, commenting on Eph. iii. 10, wrote, "The Church is to be the lesson-book of angels." Why should not the Church even now be the lesson-book of statesmen?

Long ago Archbishop Magee contrasted Roman Catholicism and Dissent by describing the first as "A Church without a Religion," and the latter as "A Religion without a Church."

The love of antithesis is a root of many evils, and the contrast is grossly unfair. Yet if a Church without a religion is dead, a religion without a Church is incomplete, and it is perhaps true to say that we of the Free Churches understand the Christian religion better than we realise the Christian Church—not that the reproach would be at all confined to the Free Churches! I am thinking now of the separate local Churches, not as federated, but as individual communities. Who can deny our need for a better Church-consciousness? The huge aggregations of population can only be impressed by the impact of a whole community. The dominating pulpit personalities of the last century are gone, and it seems as if Mrs. Browning's prayer had been heard:—"Make no more giants, God, but elevate the race at once." But the race (in this case, the Church) needs to be unified as well as elevated. Given a Church "taught of God to love one another," "standing fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel," what ministry can seem futile and irrelevant?

What sort of minister will create such a Church? One with plenty of faith and idealism—not illusion, but that idealism which believes that "the Ideal is Truth seen at a distance." We must believe in our Churches, sometimes against appearances, but the sordid aspect of our people is not the deepest or truest. We should appeal to and trust the highest in them, just as Paul in writing to the shabby, mean, divided Corinthian community, employs the lovely metaphors of the garden and the temple.

Then there is need for patience. We must plan for long years ahead. With sufficient eloquence and billposting a congregation of appreciative listeners may perhaps be quickly gathered, but a union of fellow-believers, where there is real mutual thought, and mutual oversight, can only be built up with the work of years. The long pastorate, continued through periods of discouragement, is demanded here. Francis Bacon said, "In the royal ordering of gardens there ought to be gardens for all the months in the year." It would be delightful to have flowers in every one of the twelve months, but Christ, in His royal ordering of the garden of the Church, has not provided for that, and we must have patience to wait through the barren periods.

The minister whose aim it is to build a Church must himself be a linking personality. Phillips Brooks defined the perfection of Christ's human greatness as His "transmissiveness," and it is a great ministerial asset. We must strive to be comprehensive and catholic in our temper, great-hearted and magnanimous. I heard it said once of a minister who had become reticent and self-absorbed, that his study door might well bear the legend,

"A garden enclosed is my brother, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." But such gardens, fountains or springs are useless.

The teaching aspect of the ministry has its special opportunity in a true Church; consecutive and constructive preaching will have its due place, and our people will develop an appreciation for this. Especially there should be teaching about the Holy Spirit—on other days than Whit-Sunday—and the two Ordinances should be given the place to which they are entitled. They are particularly matters requiring Churches for their understanding. Viewed as acts of individuals only, they are strange and incomprehensible, irrelevant to our day, but they have a wonderful power to create and foster the Church-consciousness. "Our Lord Jesus Christ hath knit together a company of new people with sacraments, most few in number, most easy to be kept, most excellent in significance."

Here is the vision of a Church "where a man can let himself go without letting himself down," where people are released from inhibitions and free to express the best that is in them. In such a community what new enterprise might be born, what new but hitherto hidden gifts discovered, what new light and truth break forth from God's holy word! How different preaching would be if the preacher knew that he had with him an assenting, consenting, corroborating company of believers! Our calling is paradoxical, baffling, yet fascinating, but if, as the result of our labour, the multitude of them that believe are of one heart and soul, maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we shall be helping to build up the Body of Christ, and we can be certain that our work is relevant to man's need and Christ's purpose; it will be worth while in the Lord.

P. W. EVANS.

OLD GRAVESTONES often are the scenes of pilgrimage by those who respect the dead. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem has been famous for over 1500 years, and we have excellent sermons preached there at the baptism of believers. Baptists in England have no Becket, but at the Blackfriars in Canterbury are many tombs of bye-gone Baptist leaders: the inscriptions have been copied, but the stones themselves are now in peril. It is pleasant to know that around the remote and solitary grave of Roger Worthington in a field at Hawkshaw in Lancashire, an annual service is now held, when the vicar and Free Church men unite in remembrance of the seventeenth-century preacher.