

Set Apart to be Preachers: A Charge to Students

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My brothers in Christ, now set apart to be preachers of the gospel, and probationers for the Holy Ministry; let me first congratulate you on the completion of your course, and on your arrival at this important day in your lives. It is not an unimportant day in our lives also, who have a care for you. Let me therefore wish you all God's richest blessing on your service of Christ and His Church, and upon your whole life's ministry.

Not all of you will have the privilege and high responsibility yet of ministering the Word of God in your own kirk, but it is to the preaching of the Word that you are now commissioned — as to that pastoral ministry which leads to it and follows from it; and it is of that I would now speak to you.

You are called to be preachers of the Word of God, and I hope that amidst the multifarious and increasing calls that you will find clamouring for your attention as modern Christian ministers, you will occasionally close your ears to them all long enough for your minds to be clarified, your motives purified, and this leading thought to emerge — that you are ministers of the Word of God before you are ministers to anyone or anything else. And if you find that a rather strict discipline not at all pleasing to the flesh, remember that one day you will stand before God, to receive His judgment on your ministry, kindly, but all-searching and utterly realistic, when none of the claimants of your distracted attention will have a word to say. They, too, will be under judgment. Then you will know if you have served God faithfully or not. If you have, it will be because you have resolutely put first things first, and have allowed no voice to intrude into that domain where Christ reigns and ought to reign, not only supreme, but alone.

But you may be tempted to slip a word of reminder to me here that you are called to serve men, as well as God. You will hardly think that I have forgotten that; but as the first four commandments of the decalogue command the six which follow, as in Jesus' twofold summary of the ten, and as in the Epistle of John, love to God compels love to man; so our service of God governs our service of man; nor can we serve men more, or better, however we try, than God is pleased to permit or enable us. And that service is comprehended in our service of the Word of God, with all that flows from it.

And if it is by the written Word alone that we know the authentic, incarnate Word — Christ — then it will never be our duty, or our right, or our licence, to lift Him out of that Word and set Him up as an independent authority, according to our variable predilections. If we do, and separate Christ from His word, try as we may, we will not be able to fashion a Christ who is not in some particular made according to our imperfect image. The most eminent and devout have erred here, being discovered with great conscientiousness and sincerity leaving out of their picture of Him some element of the fullness of Christ which is sufficiently and authoritatively stated in Scripture. Of course, problems of authority concern us all. But if true scriptural authority enshrines not only the divine meticulousness ('Scripture cannot be broken'), but the divine carelessness of minutiae, then surely even the most scathing reactionary should be able to strain off a gnat without swallowing a camel.

But you may protest that Christ is greater than His Word. He is

William Still has preached the Gospel in the heart of Aberdeen for forty years. This charge, delivered to students being 'licensed to preach the Gospel', has been printed several times. We make no apology for re-printing it in EVANGEL.



the Word. Of course, but you will not forget His own submission to it, and to the O.T. law (in His Christly reading and understanding of it) as that which He came to fulfil, every jot and tittle. If, therefore, that was His authority and guide, and it did not cramp Him at all, but gave Him full scope to fulfil His Father's will, should not we humbly learn to let the Word of God command, control and direct our whole ministry, making its discipline our rule of faith and life, and our indefectible guide as to the nature and forms of our service of God and man?

But we shall best maintain the divine authority of the Word, not by spinning theories about it, either of our own or others' manufacture, but by letting it speak for itself. For how graciously it takes its own command of the hearts that receive it! I tell you that if it is your desire in God not to be as popular, successful, or influential, or sought after, as you can be in the Church or that part of it susceptible to your influence, but to make the most enduring contribution to the service of the Church, you will do so far better by being a faithful minister of the Word than by any other means. One thing you will never be, if you let the Word of God command you, is dull, effete, or pitiable. You will not always be popular: how could you be? and some may dislike you or even hate you and say all manner of evil falsely against you because the Word has convicted them; but you will not be at a discount, and if men try to silence you, or studiously ignore you, or even flatter you, you will know that their elaborate, or bare-faced, or disguised contempt is but a sign that they cannot dismiss or demolish you. And all the time the Word is disturbing, shaking, enraging some, it will also be quickening, moving, transforming others, stabbing their consciences wide awake and yet strangely warming their hearts, inflaming and surcharging them with sheer intellectual emotion until some response to the mighty drive within them, however douce or dignified, will become irresistible. That, by the way, is how men are called to the ministry, as well as called to Christ. You will then be doing precisely what Jesus did, and Paul, and every divinely called preacher since, who has submitted himself to the Word of God; namely dividing men, aye, even in the Kirk, so that some are against, and some for, and of the 'fors' the Kirk will be remade, reborn, reinvigorated, refurnished with men, and perpetuated, until with the scope of your own ministry you will have provided for its continuance after you are gone, and your own sons and grandsons in the faith will be holding forth the word of life when you have long since laid down your sword.

You may think that I make it all sound far too difficult and grimly unattractive. I know what you mean and would, I think, in a way agree with you. But it is really very costly to be a true minister of the Word. For if behind the incarnate and risen

Word stands the written Word, behind that Word stands the eternal Spirit who gave it in the first place, and the glorious thing about Him is that it is He who alone unlocks its truth to us, Himself the key, and unseals the sacred book as Christ did to the unsuspecting disciples on the Emmaus road, until it burns its way so deeply into our hearts that at length we must speak it forth, or die, whatever the cost. Nothing could have prevented these tired disciples retracing their steps to Jerusalem that resurrection night. They were aflame with the truth of God.

Do you think you could never become so abandoned to the Word of God as to let it seize and master you until you became no more or no less than the trumpet voice of the Almighty? You may think you are not that kind of person. That is a complete

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fallacy. God is no respecter of persons in this any more than in other things. Jeremiah was a most unsuitable person for his task by human estimation. He was the meekest, timidest soul on earth. But God said to him: Jeremiah I am going to give you a face of brass before this people, and you will speak unto them all that I command you. And he did, until, vastly misunderstood as he was, he defied the whole nation of backsliders, from the king on his throne; and in the great Chaldean debacle which followed he was almost the only Jew to be treated kindly by the enemy. But, you may say, when you speak of a trumpet voice I think of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, and I could never stand up to that! Ah, but John did not beat the air. They came to his remote haunt from every air, and trembled, and many repented. I tell you, you cannot be unfruitful if having been called by God you let the Word and Spirit of God take possession of you and make you a divine instrument of His mighty will. Then you will find that even out-of-the-way parts of the Bible will come alive to you and to your people, and you will learn more and more rightly to divide the word of truth. And even a supposedly dull lecture, say, on the place of the Jews in the divine economy of redemption, such as one minister gave his congregation some years ago, will come alive to some of your hearers. For that evening a woman brought a girl to church and, unknown to the preacher, sat beside her with a look which said, "Now preach and convert her: she needs it!" And as the lecture on the Jews proceeded, the woman became more and more impatient. This was not the gospel. What did her companion care for the Jews? What she needed was a message to touch her at the point of her need, which was great. But the Spirit was with His Word, and since fortunately, or you may think unfortunately, we do not know what is going on in the minds of those who sit apparently impassively before us — although the Spirit does! — the preacher went blissfully on. And the girl was converted, lecture to the Jews and all, to the amazement, not to say almost the dismay, of her friend, and she is now serving Christ fruitfully in a hard place to the joy of her grateful schoolmaster and minister. This does not justify long, dull lectures on the Jews as sermons, or any other ministerial ineptitudes, but it does illustrate the fact that the Word and Spirit of God, given a man of God's choosing, and a praying people behind him — don't forget that! — can do work today in the hardest places that will make its mark for ever on some souls, and may well lead to the purifying and setting right, not only of a church, but of a whole community.

I charge you, therefore: preach the Word. Preach the whole Word, however you do it. Whether you do it by following the Church Year — one of my contemporaries used to say that it would never have occurred to him to preach the second Advent at all had it not been for the Advent season — or whether you do as some do, preaching through the Bible book by book, chapter by chapter, judiciously alternating Old and New Testaments and different parts of each, the law, the prophets and the writings, the gospel and epistles, or whether you do it subject by subject following some scheme of Christian doctrine or the Creeds or Confessions of the Church, whatever plan you adopt, preach the whole Word. Do not leave it to chance. Some men waste valuable time and energy wondering what they will preach, and often in despair or weakness turn to their favourite hobby-horse. This is not fair to a congregation. They are not there to hear your pet themes interminably. Let them hear the whole Word. That is not to say you must force yourself into a straightjacket or a rigid series, come what may. Under the guiding Spirit of God if need arise you can break into your sequence. Why not? Such occasional flexibility may relieve your congregation of the suspicion that you are merely an automaton. But you may find in the course of a series some surprising coincidences of time and topicality — certainly of individual need — which of course are not coincidences at all — God is not dead, but loves to guide and facilitate His disciplined servants. But do not leave your ministry to chance. Did you ever hear of a successful teacher who did not plan the work of her syllabus? Your teaching is more important than theirs, important as that is. You dare not plan it less than they do.

Preach the whole Word, in all its aspects: creation, providence, redemption, judgment. Preach the unity of the two Testaments

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in one covenant of grace: not in the order of law and gospel (as if law was primary), but in the order of promise, law and gospel; or, in other words, not in the order of law and grace, but in the order of grace, law and grace, with the law as the servant of grace, intervening because of sin between primal and ultimate grace, and Paul and the writer to the Hebrews turning to Genesis to illustrate the distinctive doctrines of grace. Preach the unity of the New Testament, and the agreement of Jesus and Paul. Preach it constructively. Witness how worldly men despise destructive preachers who destroy the grounds of the faith by which, at least, they gain their bread and butter. Preach the objective reality of evil, the devil and hell as well as the glories of heaven, and the triumph of God's grace, not only in containing evil, but in ordering, ordaining and using it, sinlessly, to reveal the hidden glory of the divine wisdom, love and power before vanquishing and destroying it. Do not fear to preach the whole counsel of God. John Knox feared no man. We are not John Knox; but no man ought to be in a Christian pulpit who fears man more than God. How can we preach the good news, even plausibly, except against a background of bad

news? And God knows there is plenty of bad news in the world today. One of the reasons why men pay more heed to their screens and novels, their weeklies and newspapers than to us is that they find, or say they find, more reality, not to say more drama, in the world than in the pulpit. It should not and must not be so.

Preach Christ in all the Scriptures, as on His own testimony and on Luke's He did Himself, and as Paul did. (If you want to know how to preach the Old Testament, read the Acts). Preach Christ's virgin birth and perfect life, His works of healing and mercy, and His teaching concerning His kingdom. Preach His death as the ground of the forgiveness of our sins, and not only as a display of the divine love. The divine love in Christ is no mere exhibition, but a removal of barriers to our reconciliation. Preach salvation by repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and not one without the other. Beware that dangerous over-simplification of the gospel one sometimes sees in flaming words: 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved', as if that were a whole gospel. It isn't. It is only a half, and the second half — to be offered only to the fearful and repentant. Men must learn to tremble their way into the divine arms. The experiences of the great saints and warriors prove it.

Preach the resurrection of Christ as an objective fact and as the miracle of miracles, yet the most natural and expected thing in the world — given the death of the Son of God. Death could not hold Him! Surely it is far more incredible that He should not rise from the dead than that He did! Preach regeneration (the new birth) by the Holy Ghost, and the believer's incorporation into the mystical body of Christ; and that there is no salvation, begun, continued or completed outwith the living Church of Christ. Preach identification with Christ in His death and resurrection by the Holy Ghost as a practical experience. In fact, master Romans chapters 6-8, and then teach it to your people as a living tension leading to personal holiness of life and to sacrificial service of one's fellowmen in all manner of care for their bodies and souls. Preach the Word in relation to the events and affairs and trends of the day, and find the places in Scripture to match the hour. They are there, and you must prophesy, whether you predict or not. Preach the things to

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come, as well as the once-for-all sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. Preach the coming of Christ in power and great glory, and the general judgment at the end of the world. What sort of musical performance would it be that scaled its arduous way to the heights of a massive symphony and left you for ever dangling from the pinnacle of an uncompleted coda and climax or penultimate chord! It would drive a musician mad! It is far more frustrating to Christians never to hear the end of the Christian story. Preach the Word fully, earnestly, humbly, tenderly, faithfully and let no man hinder you. To God you will answer, and not to man. And He will bless His Word by your lips, and make you a means of everlasting blessing.

Then you will never go dry, nor need uproot yourself and go

elsewhere to repeat a round of old sermons prepared for other people and for other times. Preach the Word livingly in a living situation, as only crucified men can do, and you will find that when you have done so for a number of years, you will begin to look towards the end of your ministry, however long that may be, and say to yourself, why, I've scarcely begun! There is so much to preach. This Word which renews me is also wearing me out with its amazing vitality and wealth. It is so full, and powerful, and true; so applicable, to yesterday, today and tomorrow, that I would need to preach it all day every day to bring out the fulness of the truth that even I have begun to see in it.

But by then you will have your own fruit: and while your pathway will be strewn, alas, with the wrecks of those who have despised your word and upon whose lives in consequence the signs of Ichabod begin to appear, because the glory, not to say the blessing, of the Lord has departed; your way will also and more happily be strewn with trophies rich in grace who themselves have become effectual witnesses for Christ. Your chief regret then will be that you have not preached the Word of God more purely in fulness and in balance, with less of self and its distractions to be copied by those who not only received the Word of God from your lips, but acquired your bad habits

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and manners enough to torment you every time you meet them, or hear them speak or preach. But faults and all, your word, if it has been the Word of the eternal gospel, will fly abroad, and win and conquer, and never cease because it is dynamic and creative and will go on reproducing its kind through your spiritual progeny, generation after generation, until God's kingdom in Christ, presently massing in glory, shall come.

With all my heart, I hope this will be your experience. And may God Himself comfort and strengthen you in it. For this is what He requires of us preachers. And this is what the Kirk, and the nation, and the world sorely need.

Now unto Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.