

THE MINISTER AND HIS POST-SCHOOL PREPARATION

An adequate conception and appreciation of any task is essential to its successful prosecution and completion. We believe that the ministry is the greatest task that can be committed to man. The work of the ministry requires intelligence, energy, and consecration of the highest order. When we think of the high office to which the minister is called, and consider his golden opportunities and heavy responsibilities, we are convinced of the need for the most thorough preparation. A genuine Christian experience and a divine call to preach are essential, but they are not enough. The minister must prepare if he is to "show himself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed."

A complete, formal education is important and invaluable to a minister. If you can't or won't get it, don't criticize the man who does. To do so reveals jealousy and calls attention to the fact that you do not have it. A man is down on what he is not up on. You will never hear an educated person condemn an education. Any minister can do more and far better work with scholastic training than he can without it. A minister who fails to prepare for his work robs himself and stands in the light of those to whom he ministers. If you expect to reach the highest efficiency, to accomplish the highest good, and to make the most of your life as a minister, equip yourself in the most thorough manner possible. There are two phases of ministerial preparation--scholastic and post-scholastic.

I. The Necessity For Post-School Preparation.

To consider scholastic attainments as adequate equipment for success in the ministry is a grave mistake. At graduation, your preparation has just begun. Graduation is only the foundation on which to build the superstructure. You will need the widest possible range of knowledge in these days when many are asserting the sufficiency of reason and many others are denying the sufficiency of revelation. Thorough ministerial preparedness will diminish greatly the suffering in the pews.

1. The Word Commands Us To Prepare.

"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me." John 5:39. "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." I Tim. 4:13. "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." II Peter 3:18. "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." II Tim. 2:15.

2. The Work Challenges Us To Prepare.

The proclamation of the gospel, the care of souls, the direction of religious education, and the administration of church work call for thorough preparation. One of our weaknesses is the short pastorate, which is not conducive to study. It dwarfs the intellect because it causes one to fall victim to repetition rather than to prepare new sermons from careful study. Without the necessity for new lines of thought they do not develop. In the course of years, a minister who studies and one who does not will be vastly different in the estimation of others and in their influence over the people.

II. The Nature Of Post-School Preparation.

1. The Preparation of the Messenger.

(1) His physical preparation.

Ever remembering that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, continually strive to keep physically fit if you expect to do your best work for Christ.

(2) His intellectual preparation.

In knowledge of the scriptures, breadth of thought, power of analysis, wealth of illustration, irresistibility of argument, graphness of picturing, and sublimities of imagination, the minister should be at least the peer, if not the superior, of any in his congregation. We simply cannot preach successfully to our age from behind. We are rightly expected to be leaders of thought, and not followers. We must read widely. However, there is no great value in reading books about the Bible if the Book itself is an unknown quantity. Having studied God's Word there is an obvious need to read what other men of intelligence and devotion have said about the scriptures. The fault of much preaching is found in the smallness of the thinking area in which it is conceived. The average minister lives in too narrow a circle of reading and thought. When men fail to read books, they usually neglect the one Book. We need the influence of the very best in literature upon our thinking and living. We must read incessantly for stimulation and inspiration. Study guarantees a longer period of usefulness. It is much easier to move a little box of sermons than it is to dig down and fill up a new box. That is one reason why some preachers change pastorates so often.

(3) His spiritual preparation.

If a minister is to have power, his life must be fully surrendered to the Lord. He cannot lead others where he has not been. Secret power with God will enable him to have public power with men. A minister's power is not in the polish of his style, the pictorialness of his illustrations, the fervor of his manner, the arrangement of his discourse, but in his vital and living connection with God and his capacity to act as a connecting link between God and the human soul.

The ministry requires constant study, prevailing prayer, conquering faith, communion with Christ, and utter dependence on the Holy Spirit. Devout study of the scriptures and habitual prayer are indispensable to any minister who would prepare himself for public usefulness. Unless you commune with the Lord in secret, no unction will rest upon your ministry, however eloquent your language, or splendid your illustrations, or vehement your public appeals. Hide yourself in the prayer closet before you show yourself in the pulpit. After you have prevailed with God, you can prevail with men. Illustration: Prayer or no power. The secret of success in the ministry is much prayer, study, and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

2. The Preparation of the Message.

Good preaching demands much prayer, study, and meditation. To be careless in the preparation of our sermons is a tragedy. For the preacher to enter a pulpit without a prepared message means that he has disappointed his thoughtful auditors, defeated the purpose of the hour, disparaged his own ministry, and dishonored the Lord. Many preachers dislike the hard study necessary for the best preaching. But one cannot run a bluff on an audience. The people know whether your gun is loaded or empty. Even emotionalism will not conceal the lack of preparation. Two small boys attended a church service where an unprepared preacher had scarcely begun to preach until he started to weep. The boys sat in the balcony, listened and watched, as he wept his way through. One boy said, "Jack, what is that old codger crying about?" Jack replied, "Well, Buddy, I guess if you had to stand up there and preach for an hour and a half, and didn't have any more to say than he has, you'd cry too."

An unprepared minister attempted to preach to an audience in which there were numerous preachers. Following the service, numerous uncomplimentary remarks were made privately about his effort and failure. A distinguished and generous minister remarked that he thought the sermon was inspired. One demanded an explanation of such an appraisal, which he considered ridiculous. The sympathetic brother replied, "Well, no man could have preached such a poor sermon without divine aid."

We sin against the Lord and our people if we neglect to prepare our messages. We must prepare every message. It is a fearful tragedy when people go to church hungry for the Bread of Life, but receive only the sawdust of human opinion. Our supreme mission is to preach the gospel of Christ. Time is too precious and the issues are too great to recite current events or to review books in the pulpit. We do not have any right to substitute anything for the proclamation of the Word of God. Bear in mind always that preaching is the preeminent privilege of the minister, and his pulpit is his throne from which he is to wield the scepter of spiritual power. Do not abdicate that throne for anything else. The only person who will minimize or disparage great preaching is somebody who cannot preach. No personal charm, no special grace of deportment, no social qualities however pleasing, not even pastoral work faithfully performed, will atone for failure in the pulpit. The highest hour of the highest office is when God's man stands behind the pulpit ready to preach the glorious gospel of Christ. Such an occasion, when those who are rich in Christian experience have come for a fresh vision of the crucified One, when struggling ones have come for help in the Christian race, and when lost people are appealing to the preacher to point them to the Lamb of God, demands the most thorough preparation of both messenger and message.

In these days of multiplied activities, we must ever remember that our biggest business and greatest privilege is that of preaching the glorious gospel of the Son of God. Let us preach it prayerfully, dependently, objectively, earnestly, and expectantly. But, my friends, unless we fasten ourselves to our sermon preparation and pulpit work, we will discover at the end of the way that we have spent our lives on things of secondary importance. Say what you will about a great pulpit ministry, it is the best service to which any man can give his hands, his head, and his heart. May God help you to be good ministers of Christ!

"Happy if with my latest breath
I may but speak His name,
Preach Him to all and gasp in death
Behold, Behold the Lamb!"