

SYNOCDICAL SERMON,

Preached at the Opening of the Meeting of the Synod of Pennsylvania, in the Third Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, October 17, 1865, by the retiring Moderator, REV. B. B. HITCHKIN.

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*** "Necessity is laid upon me; yea woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel."—1 CORINTHIANS IX. 16.

I suppose there is sufficient oneness of view respecting this text, to justify me in assuming that the writer here meant to characterize the Divine call which pressed him into the ministry of the Gospel. I suppose he meant to speak of it as addressed to his soul with such urgency that he could not resist, without becoming false to his relation to Christ, and burdening his own conscience with a feeling of woe. I might sustain this view of the text, from the terms used, the relation in which it stands, and from what we know of the writer's personal introduction to the ministry; but I presume that I have no need to do it.

I may assume, further, that while this may have been an extraordinary case, so far as regards the degree of the urgency employed, there is nothing in the nature of the influence which constituted this Apostle's Divine call to the ministry, which distinguishes it from God's usual mode of bringing forward those whom his Spirit consecrates for the work. If this last point does require discussion, such discussion will be more or less involved in what is to follow.

These views of the text will form the basis of some remarks respecting the character of the consecration implied in an obedience to the Holy Spirit's call to the Gospel ministry. I intend first to take a general view of a true self-consecration to the ministry, and then speak of it with special reference to the wants of our own times.

The profession of the Christian ministry has this peculiarity among the vocations of life, that when rightly assumed, it has been in obedience to a spiritual leading—an immediate call of the Holy Spirit addressed to the heart. God, it is true, calls men into other employments of life, but in these latter cases, the leadings are rather providential than spiritual. Generally, something in the associations of a youth, something in his inborn tastes, or in the openings before him, guides his choice of a calling.

Among the callings of life, the work of the ministry has peculiarities which are radical; hence it is not strange that God has distinguished the call to it by a radical peculiarity. It is only a fit arrangement that it should consist of an immediate supernatural influence upon the heart—the Holy Spirit's direct operation upon the soul, burdening it with the feeling, "My work is there, and nowhere else; and however low it may bring down my worldly aspirations, or cost what it may of self-denial, I may not neglect it except at the price of anguish of conscience and peril of my soul."

The true power of this Holy Spirit's call has not reached the heart of the young man who, pondering his future course of life, says to himself—"I may follow the plough, some mechanical art, or the business of commerce; I may become a teacher, a physician, or a lawyer; or, as I am a professor of religion, I suppose I may become a minister of the Gospel. These callings are alike open to my choice: in which of them may I expect to pass best through the world?"

If there are ministers who chafe under the hardships of the ministry, who complain that the Church does not provide them with pleasant parishes, who acknowledge no obligation to preach unless they are thus provided for, and, carrying out this principle of "no pay, no preach," are dumb Sabbath after Sabbath, and who fill our ears with the complaint that the ministry is crowded, they are probably those whose first consecration to the work was made only upon such principles as draw them into the other honorable pursuits of life.

God sometimes assigns to his devoted ministers pleasant earthly allotments, but these allotments are too rare to justify any one's venturing upon his holy profession, until he is sure of a self-devotion which will endure hardness as a good soldier, and counting the cost, resolve all the ambitions of life into Christ and his cause. A spirit like that which wrought upon the heart of Paul, throws all other callings out of the range of choice, loading the heart of its subject with the feeling that all the world has but one vocation for him, following him into the night watches, and chasing sleep from his eyes with the solemn impression—"Necessity is laid upon me; yea woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel." Its spirit is beautifully expressed in the well-known missionary chant:—"My soul is not at rest. There comes a strange and secret whisper to my spirit, like a dream of night. That tells me I am on enchanted ground. The voice of my departed Lord, 'Go teach all nations!'

Come on the night air, and awakes mine ear. Why live I here? The vows of God are on me, And I may not stop to play with shadows, or pluck earthly flowers, Till I my work have done, and rendered up account. Henceforth then it matters not if storm or sunshine be my earthly lot, Bitter or sweet my cup, I only pray, 'God make me holy, and my spirit nerve for the stern hour of strife! And when I come to stretch me for the last, It will be sweet that I have toiled for other worlds than this.'"

In one word, the inward exercise under which the heart burns with love to Christ, and, because of this love, breaks forth in unutterable longing for the salvation of the souls for whom Christ died, and is then wrought to an unconquerable desire to spend all of life in preaching Christ to those souls—this constitutes the Holy Spirit's true call to the ministry, and this also tones the heart's consecration in response to that call.

case under review, it is of special importance, both to the individual and to the cause which he proposes to serve, that the Spirit should be tried whether they are of God. Hence, under apostolical example, and other sanctions of the New Testament, we have this well-arranged feature in our Church polity, that those who suppose themselves called by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel, should submit that call to the examination and judgment of the ecclesiastical authority, and the suffrage of the Church. It is a test of its reality, not simply suitable, but also provided by the wisdom of God; and hence to go forth regarding this ordeal, would be a contemning of the ordinance of God.

But this secondary call of the Church does not materially modify the great truth which I am anxious to bring out from the higher fact of the Holy Spirit's call, viz: that a true consecration to the work of the ministry goes in advance of all prospects respecting specific fields of labor, or amount of worldly support. This was true in the days of Paul; nothing has since occurred to make it less true. In honest response to the Divine call, the Heaven-elected minister has stood up before his Lord and said, "Here am I; send me." This was his first preaching contract, his covenant engagement with God, to live and die a preacher of the Gospel. This contract is far back of all parish engagements; it is unconditional as regards them; and hence it can never be disturbed by any of their inconstancies. The parish call may be a good index to a field of labor; the fulfillment, or the failure of parish contracts may very properly affect the movements of a minister. But the terms involved in a true acceptance of the Holy Spirit's call to preach the Gospel, forbid any minister from falling back into the pew, simply because he fails to secure ministerial employment, in places, and under conditions, to which he supposes his talents, or the cost of his education, entitle him. His Lord said to him: "Go, preach the Gospel." He did not say; Go, preach to a refined, intelligent, and appreciative congregation; to the people of some pleasant locality; to communities which give to a minister honor, position and generous temporal sustenance. Such allotments may, in the providence of God, become his; but the point which I urge is, that they form no part of the conditions under which he gave himself to Christ for the work of preaching the Gospel. He is sent into a world which has every kind of field, and all varieties of society and living. There are freestone temples, unadorned rural churches, log cabins, and open mountain sides in the wilderness; abodes of civilization and refinement, and of barbarism, and somewhere in such a world, he knows nothing where, God has a field for him.

And God's providence will arrange for him both his form and field of labor. He may call him to the desk of some department of church enterprise, to multiply ministers or sustain them in their work. God may put the pen in his hand, and bid him preach through the press to many thousands. He may be sent into the halls of learning, there to work for his Lord. But generally, almost always in fact, with the living voice, God's first and best instrument for bringing truth to burn on the hearts of men, his Master would have him fulfill his solemn vow, somewhere and under some conditions, to spend his life in preaching Christ to a dying world—unless stayed by some absolute Divine prohibition, to live and die a preacher of the glorious Gospel of Christ. So that when he is gone, it may be said of him—

"Thou hast fallen in thine armor, Thou servant of the Lord; Thy last breath crying, 'Onward!' Thy hand upon thy sword."

The vow registered over his name in heaven is, that he will preach the Gospel. I now come to what I regard as the more important point of the present discourse, viz: that no lesser consecration than this will meet the peculiar wants of our times.

You may read in the standards of our Church this sentence—"The pastoral office is the first in the Church, both for dignity and usefulness." This was written in a former century, when there was no open heathen world laid at the feet of the Church, or at least the Church had no thought of the magnificent proportions of its work in that direction. It was also a time when, in Christian lands, a regular attendance upon some place of worship was customary with the people at large, the chief question being, to what church, and whose ministrations shall I attach myself? It was written by men who could not anticipate the characteristics of a future age, and who had no thought of the time when the masses would desert the sanctuaries, and keep out of the reach of pastors, and when, instead of their running after the Gospel, the Gospel would have to run after them.

I might speak of many and wondrous peculiarities of our times; and these two—the indifference of the great multitude of sinners in Christian lands to regular sanctuary ministrations, and the opening of the world to spiritual conquest, are sufficient for the point in hand; sufficient to speak the loud call of the age for the really self-sacrificing type of ministerial consecration. I speak what I believe to be now the general conviction, that the ordinary pastoral work of the Church is not meeting, and is not likely to meet, the necessities of the case.

Let me, however, be understood. I do not mean that parish organizations, with their pastorships, have declined in importance. Specifically they are just as important as in any past age—on some accounts more so. As points of concentration and diffusion of Christian power for enterprise; as conserving and promoting the interests of religion in given localities; as giving compactness to the Church, and definiteness to its efforts, I know not how we could dispense with organized parishes, with their settled pastors. They are, to all appearance, a vital feature in our system, and one that should be pushed fast along the track of Church extension, as the most efficient garrisoning of our conquests.

But the supposed pre-eminence of the pastorship, as distinguished from other modes of ministerial service, is not settled by Divine prescription. It may be more or less true, or not true at all, according to the varying phases of Christian enterprise, moulded by the providences of the age. It is not certain that the New Testament contains one account of what we technically

term a pastorate, or one precept concerning it. If so, it is only in the vaguest terms. The term pastor, as applied to men, is there used but once, and then without anything in the connection to define it. Our pastorate system is simply one of those sound and far-reaching points of polity which the Lord's general commission to bind and loose in arranging the internal order of God's house.

The bearing of this allusion to our pastorate system, upon the tone of ministerial self-consecration demanded by the age, is this: The country and the world are ready for such an army of Christian laborers as never filled the highest vision of the faith of the former age. The time has passed for Seminary dreams of pleasant pastorates, eligible positions, bountiful salaries, and parish compliments. Such things may be appointed for our incoming ministry, or they may not be, as God sees best. Concerning all this, God says to us—"What is that to thee? follow thou me." The time is past for men to say—"I am not going to squander my costly education, upon fields where I can never secure for myself position." The time has come for them to think solemnly that the Lord to whom they are giving themselves, has flocks in the deserts to be fed. He has sheep astray on the far mountains, and somebody must climb the rugged heights, torn, it may be, by the brambles, and with feet bleeding along the flinty path, and often faint with toil; but the lost are there, and Christ came to seek and to save those lost, and his ministers must look them up. And this work must come to be regarded as just as high in dignity, as well as usefulness, as any position which the system of our Church creates.

This outside work, as we may call it—outside of the ordinary parish routine—in the thronged haunts of our cities, the broad country, the mountain wilds, the sea, the land, and the world, calls for far the greatest number of ministers wanted at this hour. In this city of Philadelphia, on the next Sabbath, there will be four times the number of all who are assembled in Christian churches, needing ministers to search them out, gather them in assemblies, and preach to them the strange and blessed love of Christ for their souls. Who can sit idle amid the groans of these thousands, borne along by the Sabbath wind—"No man cares for my soul; no servant of Jesus comes to our wilderness of sin, to lift before my dying eye the brazen serpent, that I may look and live?"

But this kind of work, which now calls, and will more and more call, for the greatest number of recruits for the ministry, is a work for which no man is qualified until he comes forward self-consecrated—until he has laid all on the altar, counting and accepting the hazards of living and life, content in all things to drink the Master's cup, and to be baptized with his baptism. I said that living, as well as life, is to be put into the stake. How are these men to live? I grant to this question all the great seriousness which belongs to it. Gideon Blackburn, a young minister whose brilliant gifts might have made him the pride of any pulpit, turned calmly to what he felt to be his allotted work in the wilds south of the Ohio, as they were two generations ago. He felt that to be his duty, and his way to heaven. His work there now forms a bright page in the history of our Church. He wrought out his duty, and he is now in heaven.

How did he live? The Lord had fish in the rivers, and deer in the forests, with here and there an opening where the rough pioneer had his corn-field, and God made the hardy and often wicked men around him what the ravens were to Elijah.

I do not mean to speak lightly of the self-denying minister's exposures of this kind. I know brethren for whom my heart has often ached, and I have wondered at the heroism which has kept them faithful amid straits and suffering. Often, while sitting in the Presbytery and listening to the reading of some call to a pastorate, I have felt that there was a bitter sarcasm in placing the stipulated amount for support in connection with the sentence—"that you may be free from worldly cares and avocations."

And yet, through a life-long observation, I have seen no minister, well engaged in the Master's work, in deeper self-denial as regards worldly good, than that Master and his apostles lived and worked through; none whom God forsook in his extremity. I do not expect our Lord, who owns the cattle upon the thousand hills, and the whole wide world, to leave destitute those whom he has truly called into his work, and who are doing that work. And I will say, further, that I have seen the liberality of the churches, not to their own pastors merely, but to the working ministry in general, expanding as fast as the men come forward who require their bounty. The means of temporal support, though confessedly and most wrongfully far short of the fair mark, nevertheless advance in proportion, and I believe more than in proportion to the increase of laborers. I believe that the indications of the temper of the churches in regard to this matter are that, let them see that any servant of the ministry takes care of his work, and they will take care of him.

This faith in a providing God is the handmaid of the self-consecrating grace of which I have spoken. And this believing that God was in earnest when he promised verily to feed those who trust in him, and do good, is half the battle in meeting another oft embarrassing question—where shall I find a field? Dr. Beecher, while in Cincinnati, inquired of a young minister, why he was not at work. He replied that he was anxious to be employed, but he could find no field. "No field?" replied the hardy veteran, "why the whole West is a field, and here it lies right at your feet." Casting all their worldly cares upon Him who feeds the young ravens and clothes the lilies, men who are content to work for eternity rather than time, may find fields on every hand, or what is still better, may carve out their own fields, finding, if need be, some wilderness beyond Jordan, in which to preach; but finding also some Mount Pisgah from which often to look over into Canaan, and by-and-bye some Bethany from which to ascend to glory. I can only say, further, respecting the true ministerial self-consecration, that the

great want of this work in the world is just now a special reason why it should be a life-long spirit. It would not be well for the Church that even her best men should live too long. It is one of the laws of all enterprise in this world, that time impairs efficiency, but freshness promotes the vigor of service. The greatest enterprises of earth—the administration of the affairs of an empire, would, in time, become inert, were any one sovereign, even a Charlemagne, to hold the throne from century to century. The holiest enterprise, while yet this side of heaven, cannot withstand the operation of this law of progress. It is the wisdom of God which passes the Gospel along from hand to hand. Thus each successive laborer is spurred by the thought that, if he would not carry the thrifless talent to the final reckoning, he must do so, work fast. It matters but little that men die, so long as the everlasting Gospel lives.

But, brethren, this shortness of our hireling's day does speak of cause for enduring consecration. It not only bids us work with a whole-souled devotion, but work on to the end. It presses upon us the motive which our incarnate Lord applied to himself, when said, "I must work the works of him that sent me while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work." Christ spoke this from his assumed human nature—a nature like ours, susceptible of the wear of labor upon physical energy, and its depressing influence upon the spirit. Like us he could toil and tire. As truly as any of us, he could feel that toil is toil, and that the natural longings of a wearied body and mind are for repose. It was in this nature that he spoke of his duty and his resolve to work while it is day—to work until the sun should be gone down, for it is not night until the sun has fully set. Our call to follow him in this to the end, comes from the lips of worn-out veterans, from the coffins of those who have died in the harness; but, more than all, it comes from the stirring voice of the Spirit to the true minister's soul.

The reward is not alone that to come. It is ever present. It is heard in the exclamation from the minister in life, in death, and sent back from the other side to this mortal shore. "O, the unspeakable privilege of preaching Christ to a dying world!"

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