

Article by Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley first published in *Irish Baptist* magazine, April 1987

Preaching 12
Finally Brethren ...

“I did this day receive as much honour and work as ever I shall know what to do with,” remarked Philip Henry – the father of the celebrated commentator Matthew Henry – on the day of his ordination. In this arresting sentence he expressed his conception of the glory and responsibility of the Christian ministry.

During this series, a brief attempt has been made to highlight some of the aspects of the work of the preacher. Just how limited the treatment has in fact been will be quickly discovered by reference to a full-scale work on the subject. But the series will not have been in vain if it has not only encouraged preachers themselves but also given to their hearers a glimpse of the complexity of the preacher’s task, and of the heavy demands which are made on him. In this final article we shall look at the thrill and the glory of preaching and try to say a word to some who may be passing at the moment through a time of discouragement.

No more wonderful and exciting work

To the man who has been truly called by God there is no more wonderful and exciting work than the ministry of the Word. The material rewards are usually few enough, but the spiritual compensations are incalculable. Said John Newton, “A faithful minister will account a single instance of success a rich recompense for the labour of a life – may this joy be mine!” Life can offer no satisfaction like the sense of fulfilment which accompanies the preaching of the Word, and no true minister would ever exchange his calling for anything else. “I should equally refuse anything” said Charles Simeon of Cambridge, “that the king himself could offer me that should necessitate me to give up my present position.” To Spurgeon, the pulpit was a throne, and “when I am in full swing and the Lord Jesus is my subject I would not change places with the seraphim”. Hugh Price Hughes whose considerable abilities could have made their mark on the political world, asserted that he would rather be a preacher of the Gospel than the Prime Minister of England.

In proclaiming Christ’s Gospel, the preacher is dealing with eternal issues which make the affairs of this life small in comparison. In a very real sense, he wields under God an authority and influence greater than that of any human ruler. It is an awesome but inexpressibly thrilling experience as the preacher says to himself on entering his pulpit, “God is going to be in action today through me for these people”. “Every sermon,” argues James Stewart, “is to be preached in the knowledge that for someone present it may be now the fullness of time and the day of salvation.” Furthermore, the preacher may also be absolutely sure that every time a congregation assembles many of the people of God who have had to grapple with the stern realities of life through the week will be wistfully looking at him as if to say, “Is there any word from the Lord?” It is a marvellous thing to know that God is behind, in and working with the preacher. As he recalls the enormous possibilities of a service, the minister of the Gospel should always keep in his sights William Carey’s famous motto:- “Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God”.

John Donne summed the whole matter up well when he said:

“What function is so noble as to be
Ambassadors for God and destiny?
To open life? To give kingdoms to more
Than kings give dignities? To keep heaven’s door?
How brave are those who with their engine can
Bring men to heaven, and heaven again to men.”

But... a sterner side to the work

But there is a sterner side to the work of the ministry which ought never to be overlooked. The work involves heartache as well as joy, frustrations as well as achievements. Happily in the compensating mercy of God the disappointments are normally balanced by encouragements. Severe pressures and tensions are inescapable parts of the task to which the preacher has set his hand. The man who commences his ministry in the expectation that it will be a triumphant progress from one success to the next is doomed to be speedily disillusioned. Into every life come periods of barrenness and spiritual drought, times when work becomes a drudgery, and experiences when adversities pile up causing the minister to feel that everyone and everything are against him.

As the years go by, the arrogant dogmatism and intolerance of youth – the fruit of ignorance and inexperience – gradually give way to a realization of the growing complexities of life. Unanswered questions, challenging intellectual problems and difficult ethical issues, which were never dreamt of a few years before now loom on the horizon, dark and threatening. And suddenly there are born in the heart a deep sympathy and understanding for those who were up till that time contemptuously dismissed, as they wrestled with difficulties which were unknown to us. Secret fears and forebodings about the future begin to make their presence felt and do not quickly disappear. The weekly discipline of sermon preparation helps to focus these problems very acutely for the man of integrity who knows he must always be honest with his people.

Furthermore the ministry brings its own peculiar trials and temptations which even the most sympathetic office bearers do not fully appreciate, while the loneliness and isolation entailed in the work are understood only by those who have passed through the experience. Then above all there is that most formidable personal problem to which the hymn writer gave poignant expression in his lines, “They who fain would serve thee best are conscious most of wrong within”.

In the church itself numberless problems soon unfold themselves. The euphoria of the induction service and the early months do not last forever. The empty pews seem to mock us and the stolid indifference of some hearers leaves its mark upon us. It gradually dawns that it is impossible even for us to please all the people all the time, and some sensitive spirits find it particularly hard to cope with adverse comments and the criticism which are the inevitable lot of the public figure occupying an exposed position. Then there have to be faced the failures of those on whom we thought we could rely, the young people who began so well but have not fulfilled their early promise, and the division and ingratitude which unhappily may sometimes disfigure

the life of any fellowship. The situation can quickly become one in which a man's depth of faith and maturity of character are tested to the limit.

Some men in the ministry are inclined to feel acutely their position as the leaders of a despised minority in society. Or they become specially aware that all around them the tide has receded and that the landmarks of Christian beliefs and ethical standards are maintained only by a decreasing minority in the country. Their reaction is to fear both for the future of their family and also for the future of the Church of Christ.

Facing difficulty and uncertainty

When times of difficulty and uncertainty come, as sooner or later they will for every man, what steps can be taken? First of all it is worth mentioning that discouragement and discontent need not be regarded with dread, because in fact they can be a positive blessing on us. They betoken a longing for better things and are frequently the threshold to deeper experience and spiritual advance.

In difficult times it is therefore crucial that the pastor begins with himself and asks whether his relationship with God and His will is what it used to be and ought to be. Could it be that the criticism – at least in part – is justified and that its cause ought to be frankly acknowledged? To come to this point is not the easiest step to take, for everyone's natural inclination is to shift the blame off himself. We feel the trouble can only be with our circumstances, our office bearers or the hostile world. But it is only the foolhardy and pigheaded who dismiss all criticism out of hand. Furthermore keeping short accounts with God and one's fellows is vital, for a clear conscience is of enormous value when difficulties arise. "We cannot be too careful of ourselves," warns F.B.Meyer, "for it is only as we are separated from known sin that God will call us into the mountain to speak with us face to face."

But on the other hand, repeated carping criticism which is unfair and ill-informed needs to be recognized for what it is. Usually springing from prejudice and ignorance, it reveals more about the critic than the criticized. In these circumstances it is well for us to remember the words engraved on an old castle, "They say, what do they say, let them say". However trying the experience may be, the blind eye and the deaf ear are normally the best way of ensuring that the matter dies a natural death.

Sometimes when life seems to be on top of us we need to ask questions about our health. Do we in fact have sufficient relaxation, good food and adequate sleep? If a small minority in the ministry are lazy and do the bare minimum because they are unsupervised, there are very many others who rush to the opposite extreme. Life becomes one frantic round of activity. They set themselves quite impossible targets and drive themselves beyond their mental powers and physical strength. They rarely take a day off – sometimes foolishly boasting about the fact – and need to learn that we can often do more by doing less. We ought to remind ourselves constantly that we are called to be faithful but are not bound to be successful.

Another area which is worth investigating is that of relationships in the home. Often a pastor spends a great deal of time caring for other families but at the same time neglecting his own. This can lead to tension and unhappiness of which church members are quite unaware. But if a man is happy at home and secure in the support

of those who mean most to him, he is able to take many knocks in the world without succumbing.

The help of a wise, frank and trustworthy friend can also be a source of great relief in time of tension. So often we are tempted to believe that we are alone in our fears and our failures. It can be an enormous relief to know that we are all of us very alike and none of us is as peculiar and special as we imagine.

Again it is good to realize how much we are held in the love and loyalty of so many of our people whose prayerful interest in us is usually greater than we think. They often have their own ways of giving us encouragement, which are particularly precious in the dark days. "You will receive" says James Stewart "letters which you will treasure all your life as sacred... and when for one reason or another your work is taking more out of you than you care to tell and disappointments are encountered and the haunting question 'What's the use?' stands at your door and knocks, you will thank God at such a time that it is possible, by opening the drawer where the letters lie and reading one or more of them again, to send the low mood flying, and to rally and comfort your soul."

A review of God's personal dealings with us in the past, a knowledge of the history of God's people and a fresh look at the Gospel we preach will all help us to see things in their true perspective. It is refreshing and challenging to remember our original call to the work and the early standards and ideals which used to direct our lives. Furthermore, if things are bad now in the country, they have been far worse in previous centuries. Often the greatest revivals have been immediately preceded by times of deepest apostasy. It is also good to recall the power of our Gospel, which has continually proved its effectiveness to deal with the worst situations in men's lives and in society. "I have only one remedy to prescribe, and that is that we do preach the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in all its length and breadth of doctrine, precept, spirit, example and power... keep to the one universal never failing remedy." (Notice, by the way, how widely and comprehensively Spurgeon interprets the Gospel in this quotation).

Again in times of weakness and discouragement we need to be absolutely honest with God, telling him exactly our feelings and our problems. We are so adept at pretending before others that we are sometimes foolish enough to try to pretend before Him. Our sense of utter weakness and failure is usually God's opportunity, because when things are going well we can become too strong and self confident for God to use. What Robert Murray McCheyne said about holiness is surely true for service, "My only safety is to know, feel and confess my helplessness that I may hang on the arm of Omnipotence".

A close relationship with the Lord must always entail a daily act of committing our lives and circumstances to Him. The Irishman's definition of consecration tells us it is "an act committed once for all to be repeated daily and forever after!" Yesterday's consecration will not do for today. When the culture of the heart is neglected, thorns and briars soon grow up uninvited. And with the consecration there must also be a daily appropriation of God's grace and the inexhaustible resources of the Holy Spirit.

In Conclusion

Finally let us always seek to maintain our confidence in the unfailing and triumphant purposes of God for us and for all His people. We would do well to heed the advice of Luther's wife when he was in a fit of depression:- "Martin, stop trying to govern the world". The God we worship is a God of purposes and plans. He presides over the affairs of life and works all things after the counsel of His own will. He can be safely trusted to look after His own cause and perfect the work which He has begun. We may be absolutely certain that all whom the Father has given to the Son will assuredly come to Him, "Oh, I love God's 'shalls' and 'wills'. There is nothing comparable to them," exclaims Spurgeon.

Sir Robert Stopford was one of Nelson's commanders, who chased a large enemy fleet to the West Indies. Describing the hardships of this adventure he wrote, "We are half-starved, and otherwise inconvenienced by being so long out of port. But our reward is – we are with Nelson!" In commenting on this story James Stewart says, "My brother, my sister, life may prove harsh and difficult enough, may deny your dreams and half starve your hopes; but if you can say 'I am with Christ, and through Christ with God' you have your reward. You have found on earth the very peace of heaven."