

## *Importance of a Living Ministry*

By Horatius Bonar

"How MUCH MORE would a few good and fervent men effect in the ministry than a multitude of lukewarm ones!" said Oecolampadius, the Swiss Reformer--a man who had been taught by experience, and who has recorded that experience for the benefit of other churches and other days.

The mere multiplying of men calling themselves ministers of Christ will avail little. They may be but "cumberers of the ground." They may be like Achan, troubling the camp; or perhaps Jonah, raising the tempest. Even when sound in the faith, through unbelief, lukewarmness and slothful formality, they may do irreparable injury to the cause of Christ, freezing and withering up all spiritual life around them. The lukewarm ministry of one who is theoretically orthodox is often more extensively and fatally ruinous to souls than that of one grossly inconsistent or flagrantly heretical. "What man on earth is so pernicious a drone as an idle minister?" said Cecil. And Fletcher remarked well that "lukewarm pastors made careless Christians." Can the multiplication of such ministers, to whatever amount, be counted a blessing to a people?

When the church of Christ, in all her denominations, returns to primitive example, and walking in apostolical footsteps seeks to be conformed more closely to inspired models, allowing nothing that pertains to earth to come between her and her living Head, then will she give more careful heed to see that the men to whom she entrusts the care of souls, however learned and able, should be yet more distinguished by their spirituality, zeal, faith and love.

In comparing Baxter and Orton, the biographer of the former remarks that "Baxter would have set the world on fire while Orton was lighting a match." How true! Yet not true alone of Baxter or of Orton. These two individuals are representatives of two classes in the church of Christ in every age and of every denomination. The latter class are far the more numerous: the Ortons you may count by hundreds, the Baxters by tens; yet who would not prefer a solitary specimen of the one to a thousand of the other?

### **Baxter's Burning Sincerity**

"When he spoke of weighty soul concerns," says one of his contemporaries of Baxter, "you might find his very spirit drenched therein." No wonder that he was blessed with such amazing success! Men felt

that in listening to him they were in contact with one who was dealing with realities of infinite moment.

This is one of the secrets of ministerial strength and ministerial success. And who can say how much of the overflowing infidelity of the present day is owing not only to the lack of spiritual instructors--not merely to the existence of grossly unfaithful and inconsistent ones--but to the coldness of many who are reputed sound and faithful. Men cannot but feel that if religion is worth anything, it is worth everything; that if it calls for any measure of zeal and warmth, it will justify the utmost degrees of these; and that there is no consistent medium between reckless atheism and the intensest warmth of religious zeal. Men may dislike, detest, scoff at, persecute the latter, yet their consciences are all the while silently reminding them that if there be a God and a Savior, a heaven and a hell, anything short of such life and love is hypocrisy, dishonesty, perjury!

And thus the lesson they learn from the lifeless discourses of the class we are alluding to is, that, since these men do not believe the doctrines they are preaching, there is no need of their hearers believing them; if ministers only believe them because they make their living by them, why should those who make nothing by them scruple about denying them?

"Rash preaching," said Rowland Hill, "disgusts; timid preaching leaves poor souls fast asleep; bold preaching is the only preaching that is owned of God."

It is not merely unsoundness in faith, or negligence in duty, or open inconsistency of life that mars the ministerial work and ruins souls. A man may be free from all scandal either 'in creed or conduct, and yet may be a most grievous obstruction in the way of all spiritual good to his people. He may be a dry and empty cistern, notwithstanding his orthodoxy. He may be freezing or blasting life at the very time he is speaking of the way of life. He may be repelling men from the cross even when he is in words proclaiming it. He may be standing between his flock and the blessing even when he is, in outward form, lifting up his hand to bless them. The same words that from warm lips would drop as the rain, or distill as the dew, fall from his lips as the snow or hail, chilling all spiritual warmth and blighting all spiritual life. How many souls have been lost for want of earnestness, want of solemnity, want of love in the preacher, even when the words uttered were precious and true!

### **Our One Object: To Win Souls**

We take for granted that the object of the Christian ministry is to convert sinners and to edify the body of Christ. No faithful minister can possibly rest short of this. Applause, fame, popularity, honor, wealth--all these are vain. If souls are not won, if saints are not matured, our ministry itself is vain.

The question, therefore, which each of us has to answer to his own conscience is, "Has it been the end of my ministry, has it been the desire of my heart to save the lost and guide the saved? Is this my aim in every sermon I preach, in every visit I pay? Is it under the influence of this feeling that I continually live and walk and speak? Is it for this I pray and toll and fast and weep? Is it for this I spend and am spent, counting it, next to the salvation of my own soul, my chiefest joy to be the instrument of saving others?"

Is it for this that I exist? To accomplish this would I gladly die? Have I seen the pleasure of the Lord prospering in my hand? Have I seen souls converted under my ministry? Have God's people found refreshment from my lips and gone upon their way rejoicing, or have I seen no fruit of my labors, and yet am content to remain unblest? Am I satisfied to preach, and yet not know of one saving impression made, one sinner awakened?"

Nothing short of positive success can satisfy a true minister of Christ. His plans may proceed smoothly and his external machinery may work steadily, but without actual fruit in the saving of souls he counts all these as nothing. His feeling is: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you," (Galatians 4:19). And it is this feeling which makes him successful.

"Ministers," said Owen, "are seldom honored with success unless they are continually aiming at the conversion of sinners." The resolution that in the strength and with the blessing of God he will never rest without success will insure it. It is the man who has made up his mind to confront every difficulty, who has counted the cost and, fixing his eye upon the prize, has determined to fight his way to it-it is such a man that conquers.

The dull apathy of other days is gone. Satan has taken the field actively, and it is best to meet him front to front. Besides, men's consciences are really on edge. God seems extensively striving with them, as before the flood. A breath of the Divine Spirit has passed over the earth, and hence the momentous character of the time, as well as the necessity for improving it so long as it lasts.

The one true goal or resting-place where doubt and weariness, the stings of a pricking conscience, and the longings of an unsatisfied soul would all be quieted, is Christ Himself Not the church, but Christ. Not doctrine, but Christ. Not forms, but Christ. Not ceremonies, but Christ; Christ the God-man, giving His life for ours; sealing the everlasting covenant, and making peace for us through the blood of His cross; Christ the divine storehouse of all light and truth, "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3); Christ the infinite vessel, filled with the Holy Spirit, the Enlightener, the Teacher, the Quickener, the Comforter, so that "of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16). This, this alone is the vexed soul's refuge, its rock to build on, its home to abide "in till the great tempter be bound and every conflict ended" in victory.

### **Meet "Opinion" with the Truth**

Let us, then, meet this "earnestness" which is now the boast, but may ere long be the bane, of the age, with that which alone can bring down its feverish pulse, and soothe it into blessed calm, the gospel of the grace of God. All other things are but opiates, drugs, quackeries;--this is the divine medicine; this is the sole, the speedy, the eternal cure. It is not by "opinion" that we are to meet "opinion"; it is the Truth of God that we are to wield; and applying the edge of the "sword of the Spirit" to the theories of man

(which he proudly calls his "opinions"), make him feel what a web of sophistry and folly he has been weaving for his own entanglement and ruin.

It is not opinions that man needs: it is Truth. It is not theology: it is God. It is not religion: it is Christ. It is not literature and science; but the knowledge of the free love of God in the gift of His only-begotten Son.

"I know not," says Richard Baxter, "what others think, but for my own part I am ashamed of my stupidity, and wonder at myself that I deal not with my own and others' souls as one that looks for the great day of the Lord; and that I can have room for almost any other thoughts and words and that such astonishing matters do not wholly absorb my mind. I marvel how I can preach of them slightly and coldly; and how I can let men alone in their sins; and that I do not go to them, and beseech them, for the Lord's sake, to repent, however they may take it, and whatever pain and trouble it should cost me.

"I seldom come out of the pulpit but my conscience smiteth me that I have been no more serious and fervent. It accuseth me not so much for want of ornaments and elegancy, nor for letting fall an unhandsome word; but it asketh me, 'How couldst thou speak of life and death with such a heart? How couldst thou preach of heaven and hell in such a careless, sleepy manner? Dost thou believe what thou sayest'? Art thou in earnest, or in jest'? How canst thou tell people that sin is such a thing, and that so much misery is upon them and before them, and be no more affected with it? Shouldst thou not weep over such a people, and should not thy tears interrupt thy words? Shouldst thou not cry aloud, and show them their transgressions; and entreat and beseech them as for life and death?"

"Truly this is the peal that conscience doth ring in my ears, and yet my drowsy soul will not be awakened. Oh, what a thing is an insensible hardened heart! O Lord, save us from the plague of infidelity and hardheartedness ourselves, or else how shall we be fit instruments of saving others from it? Oh, do that on our souls which thou wouldst use us to do on the souls of others!"

--Horatius Bonar