

THE DEAD LINE IN THE MINISTRY

Three facts concerning the dead line in the ministry merit consideration: First, it is often imaginary, sometimes real; second, the minister himself is responsible for its existence; third, the path of duty never crosses it.

It is often said that a minister has crossed the dead line, when he may be on the very summit of Heaven directed labor. Hence, the rubbish of popular misconception first needs brushing aside.

Manifestly, it is not the line of age. The narrow sentiment which would reject a man before twenty-five and retire him at fifty, is clearly erratic.

Nor of apparent failure. False standards of success may shelve a minister long before his work under God is complete.

Nor of unpopularity. John Foster said he was never asked twice to occupy the same pulpit; yet, as Dr. Parker observes, "Who will deny that John Foster was an able minister of the New Testament?"

Nor of physical disability. Paul had the hindering "thorn in the flesh." Richard Baxter preached powerfully when he could scarcely rise before his audience. Robert Hall fought against great physical odds, and became the "Demosthenes of the modern pulpit."

Neither is it the line of necessary ignorance. Unquestionably, many illiterate men have been called to perform special work, and have done it with thrilling success.

Nor yet of unrhethorical preaching. Faults in gesticulation, lingual peculiarities, natural eccentricities of manner and rugged terms of expression have all been found in faithful and effective ministers.

On the other hand, all the causes of ministerial death are to be found in the minister's own heart. Streams of blessing cannot issue from a frozen fountain. One can never expect a rich harvest from the untilled soil of his soul. A petrified spirituality in the preacher's bosom can never generate a holy contagion among his people. Here and here only, is the Alpha and Omega of the Clergyman's failure to meet the true end of his calling.

This spiritual frigidity gets a hostile brood which waylays the minister's path, to rob him of his influence and usefulness, to leave him bruised, bleeding and forsaken by the wayside.

There is indolence. This undermines on all sides the preacher's fertility. His life is a dream, his pastoral work a drudgery, and his sermons are like old bread—"hard to cut, hard to eat, and hardest of all to digest."

There is formality. His people gather about him like shivering pilgrims about the glowing hearth; sad indeed, if the expected blaze turns out to be only the sparkle and glitter of iciness.

There is also self-conceit. Some preachers are like the early English author, whose manuscript was refused by a London publisher because there were not enough capital P's in his office to print it—their egotism unfits them for ordinary use.

Disloyalty to the truth, however popular, is infallibly fatal. Mixing truth with error is manufacturing sweet poison, and the heterodox preacher who does it whets the blade for his own throat.

In many other ways, according to ministerial temperament and environment, the dead line becomes manifest, but in every case it diverges from a cold, barren, apathetic heart.

Then it is clear, that crossing

the dead line is an act of the preacher's will, and not the decree of a merciless fate. If he will only follow it, the mariner's course lies far enough from the angry rocks and treacherous shoals. It was not the rough path of duty, but the easier way beyond the stile which led the pilgrims into the clutches of giant despair. The minister who yields to carnal charms, and heeds the fickle din of popular opinion, and wavers before every wind of doctrine, either has already crossed the dead line, or is dangerously near its dark borders. But for the true, faithful minister, who, eagle-eyed and lion-hearted, seeks truth to defend it, and detects error to crush it—for him there is not, there can never be, a dead line.

IS THERE A DECLINE IN CONVERSIONS?

To the Editor of the Baptist:

SIR:—I observe under your Pastor's College "Conference Impressions" in your issue of 7th instant, the statement that Messrs. Fullerton and Wilson both seemed to think that there was a decline in conversions, and that they were getting more and more rare. This subject is of vital importance to our churches.

A minister who cannot point to instances of conversions under his ministry during a reasonable time has, in my judgment, mistaken his calling. Apart from the question of preaching there are reasons why conversions can be said to be rare in these days:—

1. The reliance placed on quantity rather than quality in our church membership. The door into membership is kept with a slack hand. The swing of the pendulum has gone to the other extreme. Whereas in days of old a convert was only admitted under severe cross-examination, we in these so-called enlightened days appear only too glad to admit members. A general statement that Christ is believed in is almost sufficient. Such churches are lowering the standard of belief.

2. The general tone of worldliness in the church is another hindrance to conversion. The deeply spiritual is slighted for that which is transient and fleeting. The sermon must be short; the music must be "classical;" there must be something which is to be styled an "altar" close to the pulpit; men of means must dominate the church. Church meetings must be so only in name; the ways of the Established Church must be copied in the service, so far as the minister and deacons, and, may be, the congregation, dare.

3. The preaching of the "social" Gospel rather than the Gospel of "conversion." A striving on the part of the church to catch the eye of the masses through "social" schemes rather than through the proclamation of salvation by the Blood of the Lamb.

4. The slighting of Nonconformist principles. The superabounding charity which would meet Romanist and Anglican half way, which is not content to be neighborly, without being ready to sacrifice vital principles.

I cannot help feeling that our churches are running a terrible risk of drifting with the worldly tide. The line between church and world is not sufficiently marked. Can we wonder, then, that conversions are rare? Take any half dozen applicants for admission into church membership. Is it not a fact that five out of the six can point to no definite time of conversion? Is it not a fact that only a general kind of belief is advanced as a reason why the candidate should be admitted?

Conversion is not of necessity sudden in all cases, nor do all pass through the same experiences, but the examinations of candidates by appointed visitors do not perhaps give that percentage of definite conversion which the church ought to expect.

I think, Mr. Editor, your valuable columns would be profitably employed if others would also express their opinions.

Yours sincerely,
—WATCHMAN,
in London Baptist.

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