

The Evil of an Unconverted Ministry.

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THE following extract is from a sermon preached at the opening of the Free Synod of Dumfries, on Tuesday, the 21st October, 1845, by the Rev. W. B. Clark, Free Church minister of Maxwellton: -

“The evil from which the church has suffered most, is that of parents training their sons for the ministry just as they would to any other profession, that they may thus obtain a genteel and comfortable livelihood. In such cases, piety is little thought of, and the necessity of a divine call unknown or disregarded, and secular interests are almost exclusively taken into account. This is totally a different thing from pious parents devoting a child to the service of God, as did Hannah - a child of many prayers - a child, it may be, given in answer to prayer. With these feelings, it is commendable to train children for the service of the Lord, but not to thrust them into it, and to keep them in a waiting attitude, that, if God, by His Spirit or providence, should be asking, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?' they may be ready in all humility to say, 'Here am I, send me.'

There are few things more absurd and thoroughly inconsistent with every principle of propriety, than the grounds on which young men have too often been appointed to the holy ministry. How often have we known young men licensed to preach the gospel, merely because they had attended the requisite years at college, and were able to undergo an examination, often a very superficial one, on the prescribed subjects of study, whilst decisive evidences of personal religion were neither sought nor given; and then ordained as ministers of Christ upon being presented to a living by a patron, who, perhaps, had little interest in the parish, and still less in the cause of vital godliness?

How deplorable that a youth inexperienced in the Christian warfare should be appointed to lead the hosts of the Lord! What but defeat can be expected from such an arrangement. How deplorable. that a person should be ordained to rouse and watch over the souls of others, who never felt any concern for his own, that one should be appointed to deal with persons labouring under the convictions of an awakened conscience, who is altogether ignorant of the matter, and to point out the way of salvation to others when he knows it only by hearsay himself! How

absurd that a person unacquainted with the wiles of Satan, should be set to put others on their guard against them; and that one unacquainted with the trials, difficulties and perplexities of the divine life should be appointed to minister to souls in earnest about religion, and, it may be, in distress about their spiritual condition! Ah, when the blind are set to lead the blind, what is to be expected but that both should fall into the ditch together. Literature and philosophy, intellectual brilliance and academic attainments are good and very highly to be prized as the handmaids of religion, but it is woefully to be deplored when they are made substitutes for it. And, let it be remembered, that, however valuable, they are not essential and indispensable to the Christian minister, whereas experimental religion is. And, if these cannot both be had, let us take the deeply exercised and experienced, though unlettered Christian; but away with the self-called, man-appointed, and merely man-taught minister, who has nothing to recommend him but the enticing words of man's wisdom, and the profitless lessons of an earth-born morality.

It is only a converted and divinely-called ministry, whose labours God can be expected to own and render profitable to His Church. However profound the intellect, and acute the discrimination, and splendid the eloquence of a mere man-taught preacher, though he may gratify the itching ears of his audience, and excite their admiration of himself, so far as the grand ends of preaching are concerned, he is like a man beating the air. When a man feels the weight of souls upon his heart, this will rouse every energy of his mind, and impart a reality and vigour to his ministrations, which the brightest splendour of unsanctified talents can never equal. When a man is himself filled with the Spirit of God, he will, to a certainty be made the means of conveying the water of life to others. It is not a brilliant oration that can rouse a sleeping conscience, though it may rock it into still deeper slumber. It is the Spirit of God only that can give efficacy to the words of man, and carry them home with overwhelming power to the heart; and we have every reason to believe, that this divine energy will not accompany the words of those whom God has not sent. Hence it matters little how numerous may be the professed preachers of the gospel in a country, for, if God has not sent them, they will not profit His people at all. It may be said that the extraordinary success of a few eminent men is to be ascribed to their great abilities; but this is not the Scriptural explanation of the matter: - 'Not by might, nor by power, but by

my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts. No doubt the earnestness and devotedness of these holy men kindled their talents and stimulated them to extraordinary diligence in the cultivation of them; but it was through the accompanying energy of the Spirit of God that their labors were crowned with such extraordinary success.

It is not the elegant sermon, but simple truth which the Spirit employs for alarming the conscience and breaking the hard heart. And when the sinner is awakened, and in earnest about religion, he cannot bear the trifling of a showy rhetoric; but that is to him the most acceptable sermon which leads him most plainly and directly to Christ; for when the heart is broken by a sense of sin, it is only the balm of Gilead, applied by the Great Physician, that can give relief.

If then, this be so, how solemn the obligation which lies on us, as the keepers of God's vineyard, to make the personal religion of candidates for the ministry the first and chief object of our prayerful investigation! Without in the slightest degree lowering the literary and intellectual standard, yea, if possible, rather elevating it, still it ought to be our chief solicitude to ascertain the spiritual condition of our young men, and to stir them up to enquire into the grounds which they have for believing that God in His providence has called them to the ministry of His Son."