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And Preach as You Go!

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There was a time, about three generations ago, when the minister was known as the parson. Parson, in those days, was not a nickname but an honorific title, and it meant The Person. More often than not the parson was the best educated man in the community and he ranked with the physician, the pedagogue, and the lawyer in eminence. But our time has seen a complete switch in this situation. The minister is no longer a parson. The advent of a highly educated public has put the minister close to the bottom of the listings of educated persons. Our reaction to this turn of events should have been a determined and disciplined effort to regain and maintain superior excellence in the things which pertain to God. Instead, the clergy retreated in mad scramble behind the breastworks of administrative detail, ecclesiastical trivia, and community vagrancy. Whenever our conscience bothered us, we simply ran off to another meeting to make arrangements for succeeding meetings to flee to. We are no longer parsons, now we are “good Joes”; and in place of providing the Church with her needed “scholar teachers” who are equipped to bring God and man together in reasoned relation, we now find ourselves among those who need to be reached by the “scholar teacher” and wise men of God. What is the resolution of this ridiculous farce?

MINISTER OF THE WORD

The answer ought to be obvious. Actually, it is in the nature of a cabala. Here it is in its taunting simplicity: Make him a minister of the Word! But what does that mean? What could be more esoteric? Very well, we’ll say it with more passionate bluntness.

Fling him into his office, tear the office sign from the door and nail on the sign: *Study*. Take him off the mailing list, lock him up with his books—get

him all kinds of books—and his typewriter and his Bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts, broken hearts, the flippant lives of a superficial flock, and the Holy God. Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God till he learns how short his arms are; engage him to wrestle with God all the night through. Let him come out only when he is bruised and beaten into being a blessing. Set a time clock on him that will imprison him with thought and writing about God for 40 hours a week. Shut his garrulous mouth forever spouting “remarks” and stop his tongue always tripping lightly over everything non-essential. Require him to have something to say before he dare break silence. Bend his knees in the lonesome valley, fire him from the PTA and cancel his country club membership; burn his eyes with weary study, wreck his emotional poise with worry for God, and make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God.

A LIFE AFLAME

Rip out his telephone, burn up his ecclesiastical success sheets, refuse his glad hand, and put water in the gas tank of his community buggy. Give him a Bible and tie him in his pulpit and make him preach the Word of the living God. Test him, quiz him and examine him; humiliate him for his ignorance of things divine, and shame him for his glib comprehension of finances, batting averages, and political in-fighting. Laugh at his frustrated effort to play psychiatrist, scorn his insipid morality, refuse his supine intelligence, ignore his broadmindedness which is only flatheadedness, and compel him to be a minister of the Word. If he wants to be gracious, challenge him rather to be a product of the rough grace of God. If he dotes on being pleasing, demand that he please God and not man. If he wants to be unctuous, ask him to make sounds with a tongue on which a Holy flame has rested. If he wants to be a manager, insist rather that he be a manikin for God, a being who is illustrative of the purpose and will of God.

ONE THING NEEDFUL

Form a choir and raise a chant and haunt him with it night and day: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” When, at long last, he dares assay the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God; if he does not, then dismiss him and tell him you

can read the morning paper, digest the television commentaries, think through the day's superficial problems, manage the community's myriad drives, and bless assorted baked potatoes and green beans ad infinitum better than he can. Command him not to come back until he has read and re-read, written and re-written, until he can stand up, worn and forlorn, and say: "Thus saith the Lord." Break him across the board of his ill-gotten popularity, smack him hard with his own prestige, corner him with questions about God, and cover him with demands for celestial wisdom, and give him no escape until he is backed against the wall of the Word; then sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left: God's Word. Let him be totally ignorant of the down-street gossip, but give him a chapter and order him to walk around it, camp on it, suffer with it, and come at last to speak it backwards and forwards until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity.

Ask him to produce living credentials that he has been and is true father in his own home before you allow him license to play father to all and sundry. Demand to be shown that his love is deep, strong, and secure among those nearest and dearest to him before he is given contract to share the superfluity of his affability with all sorts and conditions of persons. Examine his manse whether it be a seminary of faith, hope, learning, and love or a closet of fretting, doubt, dogmatism, and temper; if it be the former, let him go abroad, conquering and to conquer; if it be the latter, then quarantine him in it for praying, crying, and conversion, and then let him go forth converted, to convert.

SIGN AND SYMBOL

Mold him relentlessly into a man forever bowed but never cowed before the unconcealed truth which he has labored to reveal, and let him hang flung against the hard destiny of almighty God; let his soul be stripped bare before the onrushing purposes of God, and let him be lost, doomed, and done that his God alone be all in all. Let him, in himself, be sign and symbol that everything human is lost, that Grace comes through loss; and make him the illustration that Grace alone is amazing, sufficient, and redemptive. Let him be transparent to God's grace, God himself. And when he is burned out by the flaming Word that coursed through him, when he is consumed at last by the fiery Grace blazing through him, and when he who was privileged to translate the truth of God to man is finally translated from earth to heaven,

then bear him away gently, blow a muted trumpet and lay him down softly, place a two-edged sword on his coffin and raise a tune triumphant, for he was a brave soldier of the Word and e'er he died he had become spokesman for his God.

And who shall return us to this ministry?

“Therein the patient must minister to himself.”

Floyd Doud Shafer, 1916-2002, was an ordained Presbyterian minister for 60 years, served pastorates in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. He graduated from Hanover College, the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary, where he studied with Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. A WWII chaplain, with the rank of Major, he went in with the troops in the Battle of Okinawa. He was the author of numerous articles, including a series of Sunday School lessons for the Presbyterian Church. He was the author of Liturgy: Worship and Work..

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