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Why Not The Ministry?

CHARLES L. TAYLOR

EDITORIAL NOTE:

The following article WHY NOT THE MINISTRY (THE INTERSEMINARIAN, April, 1962) is written by Dr. Charles L. Taylor, Executive Director of the American Association of Theological Schools, who recently spoke to our faculty on the subject of Springfield's accreditation and membership in the American Association of Theological Schools. We felt that this article would be of interest to every member of our clergy, and, hence, we have received permission to publish it in THE SPRINGFIELDER.

In view not only of the increasing need for parish pastors and home missionaries, but also in view of the fact that Protestant seminaries during the past three or four years have nearly all shown a slight decline in enrollment, it is imperative that the entire church be alerted to the necessity and importance of recruitment for the office of the Holy Ministry. It may be of interest to our readers to know that in 1962 our Synod placed the largest number of candidates in its history in foreign missions, a grand total of twenty, ten per cent of our graduating class. Certainly this is not a most enviable record, and we who sincerely believe in, and take seriously the Great Commission should recognize the fact that if we are to evangelize the world, to say nothing of our own country, we are going to have to recruit a great many more church workers than we have been doing. Perhaps Dr. Taylor's article will serve to stimulate and to encourage and instruct some of our pastoral readers. We sincerely hope so.

J. A. O. P.

WHAT are the major reasons for lack of interest in the Christian ministry as a live option for a young man's life?

1. No healthy-minded person is averse to a call for difficult adventure, but if he is asked to volunteer for a life of courage, packed with involvement in others' troubles, rewarded with lower than the average salary for men of his capacities, at least he wants a clear picture of what his assignment is. Does he see it? Or, in auditory rather than visual metaphor, "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself?"

2. Is the claim of the ministry, or the call of God to serve in the ordained ministry, brought clearly to his attention? A long-standing tradition in many churches makes of this call an individual matter between the young man and God. "Don't enter the ministry if you can stay out of it" was, at its best, an easily misinterpreted bit of advice. What the man hears the church saying is too often something like this: "We don't really take the ministry seriously enough to urge you to consider it. In our business we give high priority to finding, equipping and educating the officers of the next

generation; in our church we'd like to have a good minister twenty years from now, but are not doing anything about it. God will provide."

3. In particular, an immediate specific offer can easily outweigh the claims of an indefinite future possibility. This is not to say that there is no altruistic, idealistic spirit in young people of the 1960's—witness the response to the Peace Corps. But when the representatives of General Electric, Bethlehem Steel, Bell Telephone and other great companies line up a dozen deep to present contracts to our best college graduates, there must be very strong conviction to relinquish these for the hard grind of future study, postponed income, and the life of a calling the place of which in our modern life is ambiguous.

4. Is it possible that even this distant possibility (a) has not been presented at all or (b) has been put in terms that repel rather than attract? For example, such and such a church announces that it needs one thousand men each year to replace those who die, retire or flunk out—i.e. to maintain the status quo, but who wants to maintain this status quo, and why? Where is the call to something better?

5. Have some theological schools and some denominations created an impression that there might not be room for candidates for the ministry in the schools and in the church? Have college seniors and their brothers disillusioned with the business world heard so much about what is wrong with the churches that they forgot what was right? Does the very writing of this article make it harder rather than more natural for a man to seek this calling?

6. Has the emphasis on the ministry of the laity, one of the important truths recovered by the Protestantism of our time, obscured the urgency of an ordained ministry?

Similarly, is it not likely that the diversity of the minister's role creates confusion as to the central function or functions of his calling? Is he called to minister or administer? Clearly many of the more prominent clerics are in administrative posts of one sort or another. "But if I am to be an administrator," says our college senior, "why not start on the ladder that will lead me to the presidency of the big insurance company or the editorship of a great journal?" We who strive to present the ministry in terms of the joys of sacrifice—"love's costly involvement in the needs and anxieties of others"—may even be sitting on an upper floor of a comfortable office building where the sound of what we're saying is quickly drowned out.

The minister is a teacher, but if a man is to teach, why not prepare for this work, with the aid of a government subsidy, rather than risk the uncertainties of very meagre support during preparation for teaching that is to be encumbered with a hundred other duties that may make the teaching thin and dry?

Or, the minister of the mid-twentieth century is obviously called upon to spend much of his time in counselling. Why not then become a professional counsellor, almost sure of a large income, likely to work under controlled professional conditions rather than in the hurry and worry of a minister's life?

7. Economic factors certainly play a part in the decisions of young men that steer them away from theological schools. It is hard to give these their due weight without making them *the* dominant consideration. They are not. The man who has a clear perception of what God wishes him to do, or even a strong faith that he must explore this calling, will not stick at finances, but when there is confusion or uncertainty, then the dollars tip the scales. This was illustrated by the falling off in theological school enrollments in the autumn of 1960, when during the year prior to the presidential election, there was a slight economic recession. The expiration of G.I. Bill benefits had something to do with seminary enrollments. A man with a family is likely to choose a form of endeavor—work in the business world, a profession the preparation for which is subsidized, or a career that in the end will pay him well so that he may retire his debts incurred through his education—rather than a life in which he foresees scraped earnings, not very substantial scholarship aid, and little chance of subsequent high salary. All honor to the wives who put their husbands through. Nevertheless when there are children there is often a strain on both husband and wife, all too well known, from which any man who is not deeply motivated shrinks. Medical education, after many years of an abundance of students, is now feeling the need for a program of recruitment, and even the future engineers have declined in number for three straight years.

8. Essentially the reasons why many men are not seeking the ministry are deeper. The calling itself does not currently make a sufficient claim. The preacher may supply a neat illustration of the need—just as far distant from the great city reservoirs collect water, on the purity and abundance of which the health of the city depends, so, unless the moral and spiritual reservoirs are fed by many hidden springs, the people perish. But how often is the minister's work regarded as the leading of men into the presence of God? The general run of college student has little understanding of public worship and is unlikely to have been nurtured in private prayer. He is unlikely to think of himself (fortunately) as contributing to the moral and spiritual resources of his environment. Unfortunately he does not often feel a sense of personal responsibility for himself to be used by God in the way that shall bring maximum response to the world's greatest need, or even consciously seek to solve part of the world's chief problem, rather than add (as we all do) to that problem.

9. This is not only to say that astronautics and other scientific appeals are stronger than those which call men to the more

difficult solution of human relationships. It is not only to point out that faith flourishes chiefly in an age of faith. The acids of the secular society, the homelessness of humanity uprooted, the demoralization caused by a half-century of barbarous war, have eroded the soil in which the spirit can grow. "It is suburbia that, more than other manifestations of the Church's life, undermines the confidence of theological students in the parish ministry as a vocation that any man would dare to undertake." (Paul Lehmann) Hence a man hesitates to *commit* himself—to anything or anyone. "Friendship? I don't go in for that anymore. I've been hurt too often." Marriage? Probably, but often with less than an unswerving life dedication. A job? On trial, more of a trial than the marriage. This place to live? Perhaps as a makeshift until I can move somewhere else. A church? If it's sufficiently near and the minister is attractive. God? Like St. Augustine, I may get around to Him, but not yet.

10. Then where does one begin to reverse this process in which barren soil produces poor herbage that in turn leaves the soil unproductive? James Reston has reminded us of the point made by Walter Bagehot in the last century, that so much depends on the quality of the people in any society who are respected and admired. From Africa comes another report: "There was Shakespeare and English literature; history lived and science inspired me with the infiniteness of human knowledge. It may be there was in all this an element of hero-worship for my college teachers. . . . At the same time somewhere in me there grew a contempt for the ministry. . . . My school results drove home into me this idea that going into the ministry would be a waste of my intellectual capabilities." (Fortunately the author turned out to be one of Africa's best ministers.) How to infuse content once more into such terms as parson—the representative person—or cleric—i.e. one who can write, or more dubiously reverend, the man who deserves respect! But the connotation of the words depends upon the reality or unreality of the substance in the persons to whom they are applied. Men will seek the ministry if they know ministers who are performing for them, their families, their neighbors and their city a vital function that nobody else supplies. They will not follow "faceless technicians." They will not admire the overworked who at the same time are unemployed in the work to which they were called. The collegians have clearly shown their indifference to denominational shibboleths and sectarian promotion. They do not love moralistic prudes or dogmatic bigots, but they look for a quality in their minister that lifts him out of the conventional cocktail party *mores*. They run after the teacher who says with William Temple, "I am not asking what Jones will swallow; I am Jones asking what there is to eat." They are hungry for what is "noble, generous and faith-provoking." Where is this minister, that we may follow him and that the world's need may be supplied?

11. In the Matthean account of the feeding of the five thou-

sand there is a highly significant command: "You give them to eat." For here is suggested the basic solution to the problem of a shortage of ministers: the acceptance on the part of every Christian of his responsibility to feed his brother. We come seeking food for ourselves. We are told to give what we have away. We come without resources. Our Master supplies the lack. What is required of us is that we shall do our part. Dedication is all-important; initial capability is not. Who am I to be Christ's minister? "Yet it is not I, but Christ liveth in me."

12. Why not the ministry? Is it any wonder that, considering the many hindrances which we have been mentioning, the ministry, like teaching, is a relatively neglected calling? We suspect that the ballyhoo of salesmanship will not help it. What is required is more and better exposure of young men to the ministry well performed, which means genuine confrontation of men with God. If Christ is the truth, if Christians mean what they say when they declare that this world is God's, if only here we find life's true meaning and purpose, if alternatives one by one are tried and found wanting, if it is the ambassador of Christ whose grasp of life's fuller dimension cannot be shrugged off, then for our period of history to lack ministers of reconciliation between God and man, and between man and man, would stamp it as the most perverse and foolish of all time.

No individual can say he is fitted for this calling, either by reason of his love of people, or his powers of speech, or any other talent. But the churches, no less than big business, can discover men whom they will help to prepare for it. And for the individual, young or old, lay or ordained, it is required not that he be brilliant, but that he be found faithful. Not "someone should do it, but why should I?" but "someone must do it, so why not I?"