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CONSIDERATIONS  
ON THE  
CHOICE OF A FIELD FOR MINISTERIAL LABOR:  
ANNUAL ADDRESS  
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## ADDRESS.

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WERE this anniversary only an occasion for the renewal of early friendships, I would very gladly perform my part in its observance. Seven years of my life were passed in this vicinity, embracing almost the entire period of study and preparation for after life, embracing the hopeful and happy days of youth, when the dearest and the truest friendships are formed. Too many of those friendships now, alas! exist only in memory. Of the friends who were made to be friends till death, many are gone already from earth. Every scene and every object recalls some cherished recollection. Here are the dwellings—every threshold of which my feet have crossed, and often crossed; nor is there a single one without some pleasing association. Every public and every private walk—every warm and sunny spot—every cooling shade—every open space, and every deep retreat, greets me with the image of some living or of some departed friend. Had I no other duty to-day than to express the feelings which such friends and such scenes awaken, this would be enough to enlist my heart, and call forth all my efforts. How far beneath such a theme would all my efforts fall! But I have accepted the appointment

to deliver this address, and have selected for a subject, one intimately connected with the great work to which the Alumni of this Institution are called. I present to you *some considerations which should influence a Minister in the choice of a field of labor*—and shall especially aim to show that the preference should be *given to the waste rather than to the cultivated field*: that it is *a higher and nobler exercise of ministerial office to plant new churches, and to build up feeble ones, than it is to preside over and serve such as are already well established.*

These views, it must be confessed, are drawn rather from the great fountain of Gospel truth, than from the prevalent practice and the temper of the times. Somehow, it has come to be regarded as more honorable to “boast in another man’s line of things made ready to our hand,” than it once was. So that even a young man will often feel slighted, if compelled to go where some one has not already done the hardest of the work, and prepared a place for him.

To go to work in the right place, and to keep at work in the right place, must assuredly be accounted matters of the first importance for the success of the ministry. The choice of a field is not to be determined by selfish and worldly considerations, but by the desire to do the utmost for the salvation of the souls of men. The ministry was instituted by God for one grand purpose, and no man should desire to enter, or should *dare* to enter it, unless called of God, and made willing to do and to suffer all things to carry on that purpose. He that does not care for the salva-

tion of souls above all things, has no business in the ministry, and there is no *right place* for him; so that, go where he may, Christ will say to him, "What dost thou here?"

Before he can make a right choice, he should be able to say with Matthew Henry, in view of his ordination, "I hope I know so much of the worth of souls, that I should think it a greater happiness to gain one soul to the Lord Jesus Christ, than to gain mountains of silver and gold to myself. I aim at nothing but souls; and if I gain them, though I should lose all my worldly comforts by it, I shall reckon myself to have made a good bargain." Let a minister estimate, if he can, the worth of one soul, and let him remember that "whoso converteth a sinner from the error of his ways, shall save a soul from death, and hide a multitude of sins;" and then let him say how far considerations of personal advantage or of earthly good should go to determine his choice of a field. Let him remember that to labor for souls, even in poverty and obscurity, is a far worthier object than to toil for wealth, or to strive for the honors of this world. Let him remember the object for which Christ came into the world—the only object for which he would have consented to undergo his life of poverty and humiliation; and let him remember that he is called to be a worker together with Christ for this object; and then he is not likely to err in the choice of a field. He that has the "same mind which was also in Christ," will find almost any field well chosen; while the man who knows not the worth of souls will

be out of place everywhere. But while a minister true to the objects of his call will never find himself altogether out of place, his heart and his judgment will incline him most strongly where the destitutions are greatest.

1. Such a *field he will prefer first and chiefly, as opening a wide door of usefulness, and affording the best opportunities for extending the kingdom of Christ.* "What a wide field of usefulness is this," exclaimed one of Scotland's noblest sons, "in which there are teeming multitudes to be reclaimed." It was the vast *destitution* which made it a wide field for useful labor. It was not because there was the great church and the crowding congregation, but it was because there was no church and no congregation in the midst of teeming multitudes. I should be very far from underrating the importance of having our older and our larger churches supplied with able and well trained men. The man who can labor acceptably and usefully in such churches, is doing a noble work, and should be accounted worthy of great honor. But is it not a yet greater and nobler work to lay the foundations of new churches, and to build up the feeble ones?

It would be folly to say that the most destitute field is *always* the one for the greatest usefulness. This would be no more true than that other opinion, which we fear is too common, that the largest church and the biggest salary point out the widest field for useful labor. But when we consider the object of preaching the Gospel, which is not merely or chiefly to retain what has been won to Christ, but rather to reclaim

the lost, and to extend the Kingdom of Heaven; or when we study the history of the church, beginning with the ministry of our Lord himself, and see the results, we must conclude that the preference should generally be given to the waste and destitute places. Christ proclaimed the great principle of his kingdom when he said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." This was intended not merely as a rebuke to those who esteemed themselves righteous and despised others; but it contained the rule of his ministry and a rule for the church which he established. It was compassion for the lost and perishing that brought him to the world; and he went first and of preference to the most needy—preaching to publicans and sinners, on the ground that "the whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick." The good shepherd leaves the ninety and nine, or trusts them to other hands, and goes himself to hunt that which has gone astray.

Christ did not remain in Heaven to reign over angels, but came to earth to what might seem an humbler and a meaner office; but to what was truly a more divine and more glorious work—to save sinners from death.

After his example, we hear the great Apostle of the Gentiles exclaiming, "I will not boast of things without my measure—that is, of other men's labors." But "I have so strived to preach the Gospel of Christ, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation."

Was not the work which Paul accomplished a far

greater work than it would have been possible for him to accomplish, had he labored, though ever so successfully, where the church had already been planted? Yea—had Paul planted only one church, and in planting that church had gathered no more souls into the Kingdom of Heaven than he might have done in the bosom of some christian society, still his work would have been a far greater and more important one. There is a great difference between the work of reclaiming a sinner who was beyond the sound of the Gospel; and so of planting the church in a new place, and the work of leading a soul to Christ in a christian congregation. To say, therefore, that a man's labors may result in the addition of a greater number of members to the church in an old and established congregation, than in a new and feeble one, does not by any means show that the first is the greater field of usefulness.

He that labors in an organized congregation does not labor single handed. Every christian man and woman in that congregation is a helper in the work; and the joint labors of all go to accomplish the result. But he that labors in a destitute place, is laboring only as a worker together with Christ, not having entered into other men's labors. So that while he may seem to be doing less, the true result of his own labor may be more.

And besides—his work, though not attended with so great immediate effects, may be far more important in its final results. Many a man has done a great and apostolic work for the church by sowing all his life in

sorrow and tears, without ever living to see the harvest. And herein is that saying of our Lord true, "One soweth and another reapeth."—"I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor. Other men labored, and ye are entered into their labors."

Has the reaper done all? And though he that sowed and he that reaped shall ultimately rejoice together, yet there is reserved for the sower the higher joy and the more glorious reward.

2. Another reason for *preferring the destitute field, is that it manifests more disinterested zeal for Christ, and greater faith in the promise of God to his people.* The minister who goes to a destitute field, must practice greater self-denial and exercise greater faith, than one who goes and sits down in the midst of a select christian society, surrounded with every comfort. His conduct, however, contrary to the promptings of human nature, is in imitation of his master's example. It is the highest exhibition of faith in the providence of God, and the presence of God, both to bless his servants in their work, and to provide for them in their wants. It is a public and practical testimony that Christ is to be served without regard to our personal interests. It is a declaration of faith in the great promise, "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my sake, shall receive an hundred fold, and shall inherit everlasting life." The privations to which he may be called, if he can have the self-denial and the faith to endure them for Christ's

sake, are his truest riches. If the service of Christ be the end, the more we lose in that service, the more do we gain. The more we suffer reproach, the more are we honored. The more we endure poverty, the more we become rich.

The minister, therefore, so far from being frightened from any place to which Christ may call him, should, like a brave captain, rather rejoice that he has been selected for the most perilous service. He is not to be deterred by the apprehension of poverty; or to be cast down by seeing the children of this world growing in wealth and influence, while he is spending and being spent. He is not to be discouraged even by the neglect and coldness of more favored brethren; for it would not be a new thing in the world, if a minister, laboring in some obscure and destitute place, should meet with coldness from others, who regard themselves as holding more important posts. He must, therefore, "learn how to be abased as well as how to abound. Everywhere and in all things he must be instructed, both to be full and to be hungry; both how to abound and how to suffer need."

He that would faithfully serve Christ, makes no conditions, such as "provided I am well supported; or, provided I am pleasantly situated; or, provided I can have leisure to study and improve in eloquence; or, provided I shall not sacrifice the love of earthly fame, I will engage in this work; otherwise, I must be excused." He must go forth with a heart anxious to serve his master on any terms, and accounting it an honor to serve him anywhere—an honor all the greater

by reason of the greater peril, and toil, and hardship. His labors may not be requited as other men's labors are; but God is faithful, and will not forget his labor of love. They that preach the Gospel need not expect to be paid for it in this world. And it is no great matter if they cannot be. The world is not rich enough to reward them. "But in due time they shall reap, if they faint not." Let it not be thought a pity that they must often struggle with poverty while making many rich. They have meat to eat that the world knows not of. "To do the will of God, is meat indeed and drink indeed." Let it not be supposed that they who serve God can thereby impoverish themselves. For "he that loseth *his life* for Christ's sake, shall save it."

Men may withhold from a minister what is justly due to his services, but he is to do his work whether others do theirs or not. He may withdraw his services from any given people. He may refuse to serve a church which is able yet unwilling to support him, but if he refuses to preach at all, because he is not comfortably supported, or because he is afraid of privations, he is a *traitor to his Master*.

He has not engaged in this work by virtue of any agreement with men, but by virtue of a commission from God; and to God he must give an account of his stewardship. Is he to distrust God, or to refuse to serve God, unless surrounded with comforts? Or is there any evidence that God absolves a man from the obligation to preach the Gospel the moment he is exposed to any serious privations?

We have had a great deal of discussion on the subject of ministerial support; and yet it may be doubted whether the good which has resulted from it is greater than the evil. It has indeed been shown that the churches in very many instances fall far below their duty in this matter. Many have been roused to greater effort, and some have done nobly. But we fear that there is a tendency in the ministry to say, "We will not preach the Gospel unless we can be assured that we shall live of the Gospel." And while we go as far as any to assert the claims of the Gospel ministry to an adequate support, we can have no toleration for the man who would cease to preach for the want of it.

And then again—the sentiment has been avowed and published to the world, that a young man may be almost if not quite excused from entering the ministry, because his talents and his learning would command more liberal wages in some other profession. Now, it may be that young men have been kept out of the ministry by this consideration, and perhaps it is to be regretted that more of the same sort have not been excluded: but all we have to say to this is, that the farther all such are kept from the ministry the better. Every candidate for the ministry should come with the feeling that the very highest honor which could be conferred on him would be to make him an ambassador for Christ; and that that honor is all the greater because obtained by the sacrifice of bright worldly prospects. He should come, feeling that it is a great thing that he can serve Christ on any terms. We deprecate the day when the church shall be burdened

with men who imagine that they must be petted and admired by everybody, because they have *given themselves* to the work of the ministry, or rather because they aspire to its rewards.

It is a small thing that they have been educated, without any toil or expense on their part. It is a small thing that they have been counted worthy of an office, in which the noblest and best of men have delighted to labor. It is a small thing to serve Christ, unless they can be assured that they shall also have just as good a living as other men, whose all is in this world! .

Whilst we affirm that the faithful minister is deserving of the very best living that the world can give—yea more—that God values his labor too highly to reward it in this world—yet we say that to be a minister of Jesus Christ, even in poverty and humiliation, is far better than to win the most extensive fame or the largest wealth in the service of the world.

Who so well deserved the best that this world could give, as *He* “for whom are all things, and by whom are all things?” Yet He “endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”—“For consider him that endured such things, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

What minister ever endured greater privations than Paul? What heart can be unmoved by the simple recital of his wrongs? Yet we hear no complaining. There was nothing like despondency or regret at having entered on his work. “If I must needs glory, I

will glory of the things which concern my infirmities." "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one; thrice was I beaten with rods; once was I stoned; thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches."

Yet, that man's brave heart was not conquered. "I thank Jesus Christ my Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me worthy, putting me into the ministry. Did that noblest of ministers ever utter such a sentiment as we sometimes hear, "I can't serve Christ in the ministry, because the people will nowhere support me?" He claimed it as his right to be supported by the churches; yet he labored with his own hands, that the Gospel might not be hindered. He did not say that he would refuse to preach if men dealt unjustly with him, but he would very gladly do it for Christ's sake and the love of souls; though in so doing, he should spend and be spent. Though he was free from all men, yet he made himself servant unto all, that he might gain the more.

Neither did he think it any great matter to claim credit for; but it was rather matter of thankfulness that he was counted worthy of the ministry at all.

“For though I preach the Gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.”

Let not a minister, therefore, fear that because he has to do the first work, and may wait a long time for the result, he is laboring for nought. Let him have faith in God who has sent him, and who has said to him, “He that goeth forth and weepeth bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

And of all men, let the Minister of the Gospel be the last to confess his fear of poverty. “He shall dwell on high; his place of defence shall be the munition of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.” He must not render himself incapable of preaching to the people what the Master has preached to him, “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat and the body more than raiment?”

3. Another advantage of preferring the destitute fields, is that it would open a wide door of usefulness for many who now seem to have nothing to do, or are waiting to be called.

We know that the harvest is still great, and the laborers are few. Yet there are many who stand all the day idle, and the only excuse which they give is, “That no man will hire them.” Are they not already under contract with Jesus Christ, and that not on condition that some established congregation shall call them and support them? They should make choice

from what is actually before them. If God's providence points out to them a different field from what they expected, they should go forward and labor with zeal. Christ knows far better what is for the good of his church than even the wisest and most devoted of ministers can know. He knows too, what work is suitable for every laborer, better than each can know for himself. We are too apt to be warped by selfish consideration; and if we suffer such to control us, though we may gain more of the world, and win more applause, we shall certainly cheat ourselves of the highest rewards which are bestowed on faithful ministers.

If we would take a correct view of destitute fields, not only would many enter them who are now idle, but those who labor in them would be more successful. It is too common for those who go to such fields, to look upon their situation as a temporary one. They do not feel permanently settled, but rather as if they were only serving a kind of apprenticeship; and so are all the time on the look out for what they call a wider field of usefulness; which being rightly interpreted, often means, *a more comfortable position*. The consequence is, they do not half cultivate the field while in it; as a tenant by the year will never improve like one who has settled for life. They who go then to destitute places, should go with the resolution to accomplish the work of God there as far as he shall enable them. Why should the work of laying the foundations, and building up be considered as fit only for the young and inexperienced, or for such as can

find nothing else to do? This work of planting and building was once called apostolical and evangelical. It was the noblest work to which the servants of Christ could aspire. Is there not danger that we shall underrate it, or that we shall too readily shrink from the difficulties of it? Who are sent to the waste fields? Who are expected to endure the hardships and surmount the difficulties of establishing the Gospel in new places? Do we find the tried and veteran Soldiers of the Cross coming forward to claim the peril and the honor as theirs?

Against the desire of having any pre-eminence in the church except the pre-eminence of the most abundant and most disinterested labors, Christ carefully warned his disciples. In honor, christians should prefer each other; but in labors each should strive to excel. But if it be true that the posts of greatest difficulty be posts of greatest honor, there is reason to fear that this christian grace of giving the preference to others is carried quite too far.

When Chalmers had won a fame such as few men ever attained—after he had held the highest and richest places in the gift of his church—after he had been the great leader of the Free Church Movement—in the Sabbath of his life—at an age when most men retire from active pursuits—he performed the noblest of all his labors as a missionary in West Port, the most destitute and depraved of all the precincts of Edinburgh. Nor do we hesitate to say that Chalmers, preaching in the *Tan loft* of West Port, to an assem-

bly of ragged outcasts, was greater than Chalmers preaching in the Tron Church, to which the wealth and fashion of Scotland crowded—greater too than Chalmers in the Chair of Theology.

We have ministers too, whose health cannot endure the close confinement and constant study required of city pastors, and who, being forced from their places, resort to travel or some other recreation to repair their exhausted energies. Many a destitute field, where the people are perishing for the lack of the bread of life, would be the very best retreat for such; so that at the same time they could *get good and do good*. Why would not our mountains, our valleys, our broad prairies, and our retired villages, serve all the purposes of rest from too great mental activity, and of recreation for physical debility; and at the same time afford opportunities for preaching Christ to the destitute?

There are many broken-down ministers, who might have had health and strength, had they been contented to do a different kind of work; and there are others who would find both body and mind more refreshed by going about like their Master, and preaching in all the villages of the land, than by any tours to foreign countries.

But, whatever field a minister may occupy, let him be instant in season and out of season—in the great congregation of believers, or in the wide wastes of destitution. It is a great and blessed work to which he is called. To have the privilege of serving God in such a work, is to have the greatest favor which could

be bestowed on a mortal. To be able to say we are ambassadors for Christ, is to be entrusted with a work which angels might covet. What more could God commit to the hands of men, or what higher honor could man aspire to? The minister is not only to work *for* Christ, but to work *with* Christ.

“’Tis not a cause of small import,  
The pastor’s care demands,  
But what might fill an angel’s heart,  
And filled a Saviour’s hands.”

Who will place the highest earthly honor or the greatest earthly reward above the honor and reward of serving Christ even in the humblest place in the ministry?

Go forward to that period when time shall be no more, and see what shall become of the great men and great deeds of this world. Buried in the ruins of time, they lie forgotten, while “they that turned many to righteousness shall shine as the stars, forever, and ever.”

