

PAUL'S VALUATION OF HIS MINISTRY.

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The conviction a preacher holds as to the value of his ministry will greatly influence his life-work. That conviction marks his conception of personal responsibility in the carrying out of a great plan, in which all the forces enlisted are designed to work together for one divine event—the setting up of the kingdom of God among men. The valuation will determine the measure of consecration, and the consecration, within the limits of given abilities and opportunities, will determine both the intensive and extensive aspects of his achievement. Appreciation would perhaps be a more accurate word for the purpose in view in this article, but it has become so shopworn that its full import is not commonly realized. So valuation is adopted as the key-word here.

1. Paul did fully value his ministry. To linger long in proof of this would be carrying coals to Newcastle. He enthroned it above all rival considerations, and placed upon it a crown which, in his estimation, no other human employment was worthy to wear. There dwelt in his mind a constant sense of the significance of the position he occupied. "How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings of good things!" The apostle believed his own quotation. It was a matter of great moment that he "was appointed a preacher."

His valuation of the office is often *implied*. The glory he felt in his ministry is realized by the reader even when Paul has not formulated it into words. A spirit deeply interfused through all his words and acts proclaimed that his being lived and moved on uncommon ground. It was a light within a globe, glowing through all its embodiment. It pervades his letters as the wind the leaves of the forest trees. There is about

him a dignity, solidity, and strength whose roots run deep into the soil of his being.

One of Paul's culture and taste will never be needlessly personal, yet when occasion demanded, he openly *proclaimed* the importance he attached to his vocation. "I glorify my ministry." "I reckon that I am not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles." When later he called himself the least of all the apostles, he was not thinking of the office or work of the ministry, but of himself spiritually, having specially in memory the years when he was a "blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." "I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus." And it is worthy of emphasis that his valuation of his vocation was never subject to depreciation. The initial halo that brightened around his conception never faded into the light of common day, but retained its lustre throughout his many and diversified experiences. His appreciation maintained its lofty pristine level. It burned ever like a vestal fire in the temple of his soul.

2. The reasons for Paul's supreme valuation of his ministry lay in several considerations, the *first* of which was that he discovered that his life was a factor comprehended in God's original plan for getting the gospel preached among men. "God, who separated me, even from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace." He was not an incidental conscript, substituted at the eleventh hour for some one who, like Judas, had fallen away; but, in the original divine blue-prints, God had made allowance and assigned a place to Paul's ministry. He was God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the good work of the ministry, which God afore prepared that he should walk in it. He thus saw himself as a predestined tributary to the great stream of divine purpose flowing through the ages, which fact lent dignity and a cosmic significance to his appointed work.

A *second* reason on which Paul rested his valuation was that he was sure of his call in time to take up this before-prepared ministry. What the author of Hebrews says as to the high priest's office, Paul would have heartily affirmed of the Christian ministry. "No man taketh the honor unto himself, but when he is called of God," and never was one more free from having taken the initiative in the matter than was Paul. "Paul, called to be an apostle through the will of God," and "separated unto the gospel of God." "I was appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher." The carefully scientific critic may discuss the method of the call, whether it was merely psychological or objectively audible, but the fact of certainty to Paul's own soul cannot be eliminated. He had seen his burning bush, and knew the voice heard therefrom was God's, and he henceforth walked on holy ground.

Viewed absolutely, there would be strong presumptive evidence of the value of a clear call from such Authority, but a *third* reason for the apostle's worthy valuation of his ministry appeared when there was committed to him a stewardship in "the mysteries of God." The situation assumed a practical phase when there was given to the enlisted soldier his weapon: "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." And Paul was as sure of the facts here as he was of his divine call. The "word of reconciliation" had come to him directly "For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ." The saving truth deposited with him made him "debtor both to Greeks and Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." His call began to relate itself to life as he realized that in his possession were "unsearchable riches" to be administered for the benefit of a race spiritually impoverished. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," but "how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Considering together an authoritative call to preach and the truth which he was to declare directly revealed to him, a *fourth* factor in Paul's valuation of his ministry logically emerges: he was sure of its significance to God's cause in the world. The received truth was the "power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth," regardless of the many who "opposed themselves and blasphemed," rejecting the Way. As the apostle preached in many places, God would bless the truth, and "take out of them a people for his name." His ministry thus had a significance as it related to individual hearers, who thereby believed unto eternal life.

His ministry was, also, to become the master factor in liberating the gospel, in determining the views of the time as to the gospel's essential nature and practical scope. Was Christianity to become a new Judaistic sect only? Was the gospel, as had been the law, to be bound by Palestine, or was it to be the good news for the whole human race? Efforts were being made to limit it, confine it, or cumber it; and to Paul's illuminated mind this was intolerable. "A man is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ." This basal fact the apostle resolved to keep clear from all entangling alliances, disengaged from burdening ceremonialism. The middle wall of partition must be broken down, for the "same Lord is Lord of all, and is rich unto all that call upon him." The divine vase must be shattered, that its imprisoned fragrance might fill the world. Peter might turn back and Barnabas dissemble; but not one inch would Paul retreat from his advanced position of equal rights to all in the grace of the gospel, and that, too, untrameled by Jewish customs, whose time for vanishing away had come. "Not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised." Paul saw the danger as did no other man; and over against the hostility of the Jews, and the vacillation of converts, there arose his clear voice, that has since been

“heard round the world.” Humanly speaking, but for his defence, what might have been the fate of the gospel’s intended universality, we cannot say; but by valiant argument and consistent preaching he met the “false brethren,” and overcame them fully and forever. It was a battle of principles, and principles, championed by this apostolic knight-errant, gained the day.

His ministry had a further and vast practical significance to the kingdom in that Paul was set apart to be a missionary pioneer. Of all his generation it was Paul who should most lengthen the cords of the kingdom. He had early heard the command, “Depart; for I will send thee forth far hence to the Gentiles.” The wisdom behind this commission was revealed when it soon became evident that his “kinsmen according to the flesh” were going to be “disobedient to the heavenly vision” brought to them in the gospel. Preaching among them was sowing on soil beaten hard by tradition and prejudice. The fertile fields lay in the “regions beyond.” The lands that long in darkness had lain were by Peter to see a new light. In harmony with the original orders from the Crown, “The Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.” He was to strike for heathenism’s fallow ground. His work would thus become a base of operations for other missionaries. “I laid a foundation; and another buildeth thereon.” Along the trail he was to blaze in the heathen wilderness, the torch-bearers of the gospel would travel in after years; for smaller men are able to follow where a greater has led. And his special call was reinforced by a worthy personal ambition to “preach the gospel not where Christ was already named,” that he “might not build upon another man’s foundation.” He was the flying wedge that first broke into the vast ranks of those children of darkness who had “refused to have God in their knowledge.” The significance to the kingdom’s future course and progress of that chain of

churches which Paul established through the important cities of Asia Minor and Europe is inestimable.

3. Important consequences inevitably flowed from such a valuation of his ministry by the apostle. It set him firmly in his vocation. "Necessity is laid upon me; for woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." He could never think of any other calling as worth while for him. "Christ had taken him, as the sovereign harmony takes the wandering tone." He had seen the "vision splendid" of the ministry; he would follow the gleam. He reckoned that other things were not worthy to be compared with the glory of the ministry. He had entered the divinely opened field, and closed the gate behind him. He had put his hand to the plow, and could never be so unworthy as to look back. He must accomplish the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus. He was

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward."

It made him *diligent* in his work. Only a thing convincingly believed and fervently felt to be of greatest value could have urged a man into the labors which Paul gladly assumed. Converted, "straightway in the synagogues he proclaimed Jesus," and ceased only when a martyr's death hushed his tongue forever. The record that lies between those dates is unique in history. What a vision of holy activities rises before an intelligent mind out of his statement: "From Jerusalem, and round about even unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." And then to Rome, perhaps to Spain, and back again into Asia Minor and Greece he carried the good news of the grace of God unto all men. Surely his statement is justified, "I labored more abundantly than they all."

The inner sense of the worth of his ministry gave him a spirit of *enduring courage* which no fiery trials could

quench. "Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck," and there follows the long list of perils and pains endured in the name of the Lord Jesus. "We were accounted as sheep for the slaughter." "Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted * * * we are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things." But in spite of it all he was courageous in pursuing his course. At Lystra he was dragged out as dead, but it is recorded that "he rose up, and entered into the city" again. His friends besought him not to go up to Jerusalem to Pentecost for danger of the Jews, but Paul answered, "I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." To die were gain if he fell on the field where the Lord had appointed him to fight. His consecrated soul fully appreciated what is elsewhere written, "Jehovah is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

So important was his assigned task that he was fortified against failure. "Seeing we have this ministry * * * we faint not." Perseverance was a native trait with Paul, but as his life was now devoted to a greater cause than in earlier days, we may well believe that this quality was strengthened and elevated. We see him in the driving power of a great conviction of duty.

For where he fixt his heart he set his hand
To do the thing he will'd, and bore it through."

To read the record of this man's sufferings and labors stirs us, on the one hand, with compassionate feelings, and, on the other hand, arouses whatever elements of heroism may be slumbering within us.

"Yes, without cheer of sister or of daughter,
Yes, without stay of father or of son,
Lone on the land and homeless on the water,
Pass I in patience till the work be done."

Moreover, Paul's clear conception of the importance of his ministry stimulated him to utmost *faithfulness* in delivery of God's truth. He was a steward of the mysteries of God, and "it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful." He did not pare off the severer phases of the message. He did not water to weakness the strong medicine of the gospel. Neither fear of unpopularity nor hope of favor shaped his speech. "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God." "But even as we have been approved of God to be intrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who proveth our hearts." "I ceased not to admonish you every one night and day with tears." His preaching was "unto Jews a stumbling-block and unto Gentiles foolishness;" but it was a small thing that he should be judged of any man's judgment, if only Christ, who had appointed him to service, counted him faithful. It was God's message; he would deliver it; and, as in the case of the old prophet, "they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them."

Thus Paul so highly valued his ministry, so appreciated its significance, that he exercised himself to have a conscience void of offence toward God and man. He endeavored to make full proof of his vocation. There is a causal connection between his high valuation and faithful fulfilment of his ministry and the mingled pathos, confidence, and satisfaction that breathe forth from his swan-song, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." At eventide there was light, soft, sweet, and heavenly; and such light as never has its origin on land or sea here below.

Paul was the Master's greatest preacher: *primus inter pares*. It is refreshing and stimulating even to walk in the shadow of his greatness. It is a tonic to the ministerial conscience, a rebuke to ministerial indifference and languor. There were some things in Paul's minis-

try that were local and temporary in form, but the underlying principles are unchangeable. Suffer a word of exhortation. In view of the apostle's attitude, in whom the mind of the Master was so nearly reproduced, is there not need of a new evaluation of their ministry by those who have been called to that sacred function? The saint and scholar who made the talk at the ordination of the writer, and who now rests under the shades of beautiful Hollywood, said on that occasion, "Young men, magnify your ministry." Sure of a call, of the possession of the abiding truth, of his ministry's significance to individuals and to the kingdom, the spirit of Paul should rule to-day in the heart of every one who

"negotiates between God and man,
As God's ambassador, the grand concerns
Of judgment and of mercy."

He should gird up the loins of his whole being, and walk worthy of that high vocation whereunto he also has been called. For

" 'Tis not a cause of small import
The pastor's care demands,
But what might fill an angel's heart;
It filled the Saviour's hands.
They watch for souls for which the Lord
Did heavenly bliss forego,
For souls that must forever live
In raptures or in woe."