



## Choosing your preacher

***"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ,  
and stewards of the mysteries of God."***

**1 Corinthians 4:1**

What do you think of your preacher? I am assuming you have one — a preacher, a priest, a minister — it really doesn't matter what you call him. Maybe you do not even go to church very often, but there is someone you consider *your preacher*. If you had trouble, you would probably go to him. Or perhaps there is a minister or priest whom you know vaguely, but you have definite opinions about him and you tend to think of all clergymen in terms of that preacher you just happen to know a little bit about. Whatever the case may be, what do you think of your preacher? That is a very important question, because what you think of your preacher says something about the state of your soul.

As a matter of fact, if a man does not have the right preacher, there is a good chance that he will go to hell. And that is why the whole subject of preachers is pretty important for those who preach and for those who listen.

If you are like most people today, chances are you don't have a very high opinion of preachers in general and perhaps not even of your own preacher. The image of the ministry is badly tarnished. An article that appeared some time ago in *Christianity Today* describes the "Images of the Pastor in Modern Literature." It is pretty frightening. The article says, *"During the twentieth century the image of the clergyman in fiction has changed. Once seen as a crusader, he has now become a doubter. Once a comforter, he is now an accommodator."* In his book, *The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature*, John Killinger has said, *"far from standing like lonely figures in the ship's prow, (the clergy) have tended to be found in far greater abundance on the poop deck."*

The widespread disillusionment with the clergy's performance is being expressed by a raft of books that attempt to diagnose the trouble with the pulpit. One of them cynically states that most sermons today are half-baked, soft boiled, or cold. They lack the impelling force of the power of the living God. Helmut Thielicke points right at the pulpit as he diagnoses the trouble with the church. He remarks that the average churchgoer stands before a *"rubbish heap of dead words."* Another writer talks about the *"famine of the Word"* in the churches today. To be sure, there are some people who still go to church, but they go with the almost frantic hope of hearing something that will help them and their patience is wearing thin. In an article entitled, "A Layman Speaks to the Pulpit," William J. Samarin has said, *"Speaking is so important to us that we often tolerate an abundance of nonsense to get a few specks of substance. Yet our tolerance has limits..."*

Because of the crisis of the clergy, many of them often feel frustrated and unsure of themselves. They experience a distressing conflict of roles: they do not know sometime whether they are to be a civil rights worker, a psychologist, a master of ceremonies, an entertainer, or what. I feel sorry for them. But I feel much more sorry for the multitudes of people who, as a result of the clergy's crisis, are like sheep without a shepherd. They are starving because no one is giving them God's living bread and God's living water is nowhere near to slake their terrible thirst.

So, what do you think of your preacher? Does he feed your soul? If he doesn't, you should start searching for one who does, because you need a preacher who really preaches, and your family does. What is a preacher's real task anyway? Do you know? You should know, and you should not rest until you have put yourself beneath the ministry of a man who is a real preacher of God's Word.

Fortunately the Bible gives us a great deal of information about what a preacher is and what we may expect of him. Take, for example, the information we have about one of the earliest churches, the church in Corinth. That church, incidentally, consisted of groups of believers who lived in or near the city of Corinth. They had preacher problems in that church. People were becoming attached to individual preachers, men like Paul and Apollos and Peter. As a result, there was division within the church. Speaking to that problem, the Bible makes a very significant statement about the ministry. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, one of those preachers, Paul, speaking for all of them and for all true preachers of all time, said,

*"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."*

Now, right there in just a couple of phrases, you have what a preacher is. According to the Bible, he is *a minister of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God*. Another translation puts it this way: preachers are servants of Christ *"who have been put in charge of God's secret truths."* Now, when you choose your preacher you must keep this text in mind.

The first thing to remember when you choose your preacher is this: the kind of preacher who can help you remain close to God is a man who understands that he is responsible to Jesus Christ. Paul says, *"A preacher is a minister of Christ."* The word used for *minister* here is a word that means attendant or slave. It can even refer to the slaves who used to man the oars on a galley. You have seen pictures, haven't you, of those ancient boats that were propelled by the sheer muscle power of the slaves who pulled on the oars? A preacher is a man whom Jesus Christ has assigned to pull the oars for Him.

This means that preachers are responsible to Jesus and they are required to please Him. That is why, when you are choosing a preacher, you should try to discover whom the man is trying to please. Is he trying to please you, is he trying to please his congregation, is he trying to please his board of trustees, is he trying to please himself — if you have to say yes to any of these questions, that preacher will not help you.

Oh, this doesn't mean that a minister may run rough shod over the feelings of his people — he must be tactful and loving; no one denies that. But unless he understands that his ultimate responsibility is to Jesus Christ, his ministry will fail to help anyone. The apostle Paul was a man who knew that as he carried out his ministry, he always had to be conscious of Christ's judgment, not men's judgment. He wrote in this same 4th chapter of 1 Corinthians:

*"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord".*

(1 Corinthians 4:3, 4)

Perhaps you go to a beautiful church, a successful church. The choir sings beautifully. And all your friends go there. And the sermons? Could be worse — quite eloquent sometime, as a matter of fact. Let me ask you this: have you placed yourself beneath the ministry of one who knows he is a slave of Jesus Christ? If you haven't, no matter how nice your church is, you're still in the wasteland.

The second thing you must keep in mind when you judge your minister or search for one who can serve you, is this: *a minister is a steward of the mysteries of God*. You know what a steward is: he is someone who is in charge of certain monies or foodstuffs and he handles this money or these provisions in the best possible way. A ship's steward, for example, is in charge of the supplies on board and he sees to it that they are available to the passengers when needed. A preacher is a man who is responsible to Christ for the proper handling of God's mysteries.

Now, what does this mean? Unfortunately, this little text has been mistranslated very frequently. There has been a misunderstanding of the word *mystery*. Somewhere along the line, the word *mystery* was associated almost exclusively with the word *sacrament*. You know what the sacraments are — the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, and Baptism, and some churches have other rites besides, which they call sacraments. In any case, the word *mystery* came to stand for

sacraments. Therefore the clergy were considered to be people who were in charge of the *sacraments*. They were stewards of the sacraments, and they dispensed them to those whom they considered worthy to receive them.

No one denies, of course, that one of the duties of the clergy is the administration of the sacraments. But when this is considered their main duty, a great deal of confusion results. For example, people are apt to conclude that, so long as clergymen dispense the sacraments, everything will be all right. That is why it is so important to point out that the word *mystery*, in 1 Corinthians 4:1, says nothing about the sacraments.

The *mysteries of God* are, rather, those truths about God which men could never discover by themselves, but which have become available through God's revelation. In the second chapter of first Corinthians, we find what is meant by the word *mystery*:

*"But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."*

The mysteries of God are the glorious truths of God revealed in the Bible. They are the truth of God's creation of all things, the truth of God's redemption through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the truth of Christ's abiding kingship and ultimate return to judge the living and the dead. The mysteries of God are dominated by the redeeming figure of Jesus Christ, and they are focused upon the incomprehensible revelation of God's love that was expressed at Calvary's cross where Christ the mighty maker died for man, the creature's sin. Those who are stewards of the mysteries of God have one unending preoccupation: they must proclaim incessantly the glory of God's love and call men to repentance and faith.

Don't ever be satisfied with a speech when you go to church. There is a world of difference between a speech and the proclamation of the Word of God. A speech consists in a man's thoughts and there are numerous occasions when they can be useful. But the preaching that must mark the life of the church originates in God's revelation of His unsearchable wisdom. B. T. Forsyth, in his book, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, has contrasted oratory and preaching by pointing out that oratory attempts to make the crises of this present world clear to men, but preaching tells of truth that comes from an unseen world and it highlights the crises that arise when God meets men.

There are all kinds of words that are being fed people today, words that are supposed to be preaching, but they are not. Some time ago, a Baptist preacher from Missouri described the kinds of sermons that people frequently hear today. He talked about the elegant sermon and the overly psychological sermon, and he pointed out how some of them are just *chip on the shoulder* sermons, and others are purposely ambiguous. Some sermons today are adventures into the land of doubt. When you sit in the pew and listen to your preacher, don't be satisfied with anything less than the wisdom of God. That is the kind of minister you need. Anything less will cripple your spiritual life and you are going to suffer, and your children will suffer even more.

The kind of preacher you need is a man who knows that he is Christ's servant and a steward of the mysteries of God. Sad to say, men like that are rather hard to find today. There is a great deal of professionalism among the ranks of the clergy, and social climbing, and status seeking. That is too bad, for them. Preachers must always remember the words of the great apostle who said, *"But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway"* (1 Corinthians 9:27). It is too bad when men who are supposed to tell others about the living bread and the living water have never eaten the bread nor drunk from the fountain themselves.

It is too bad for them, but it is also very dangerous for you. If you are satisfied with something that is less than the preaching of the Word of God, that means that you are satisfied with something less than God's grace. That means that you believe that you do not really need His grace for salvation. You can do without the message of the cross of Calvary. The trouble today is that countless thousands of people are willing to accept a substitute for the gospel of grace.

In Jeremiah 23, God makes some strong statements about His powerful message.

*He says, "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! ... The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully ... Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?"*

If you are sincerely interested in the salvation of your soul, go find a man whose own soul has been riven through by the sword of the spirit, the living word of God, a man in whose mouth the Word of God is like a fire, a man who handles God's mighty message like a hammer. This does not mean that he must be an overpowering, intense, dramatic person. But it does mean that he must be a man who never forgets that he is a steward of God's mysteries. Possibly he will have all kinds of faults. And there may be many things about him that you dislike. But if he is truly a steward of God's mysteries, listen closely to his message of salvation through Jesus' blood, believe it, and obey it. If you do that, you will be saved.

Yes, you will be saved, because, you see, those who are truly preachers of God's Word have received a wonderful promise that concerns you directly. It is found in 1 Timothy 4:16. Listen: *"Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."*

#### *Prayer*

*Great Shepherd who leadest Thy people in love,  
'Mid cherubim dwelling, shine Thou from above;  
In might come and save us, Thy people restore,  
And we shall be saved when Thy face shines once more.*

*Thy vineyard no longer Thy tender care knows,  
Defenseless, the victim and spoil of her foes;  
O turn, we beseech Thee, all glory is Thine,  
Look down in Thy mercy and visit Thy vine.*

*When Thou shalt revive us Thy Name we will praise,  
And nevermore turning, depart from Thy ways;  
O Lord God Almighty, in mercy restore,  
And we shall be saved when Thy face shines once more.*

*In Christ, Amen.*

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