

The Result of the Ministry

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The question is sometimes asked; Why should so small a result be seen in true godliness and growth in grace, from the ministry of the Word, addressed to believers? Let us consider it briefly, and begin by admitting with sorrow that the result of all our ministry, whether by voice or pen, is very small. To face facts is always right, as also it is to enquire concerning the cause, and seek to apply the remedy.

It will hardly satisfy any exercised conscience to be reminded that we are living in days when the utmost that could be said as to saints generally is that they have but "a little strength" (Rev. 3: 8); and to infer that consequently we cannot expect anything beyond that which one sees at present. We should reply at once that such statements made with prophetic insight as to the mass, are never rightly used, if quoted to hinder the exercises of the individual, or his desires after that which is better. A "man of God," in the Scripture use of the term, is one who proves himself to be an exception to the rule by standing for God, and caring for His interests, when the mass is marked by declension and indifference.

So let us together face the question, Why so small a result in godliness and growth in grace from all the ministry? Is it the fault of the ministers, the ministry, or those to whom the ministry is addressed? In attempting an answer, we can only speak according to our knowledge and experience; bounded by our circle of acquaintance, which is of necessity very small compared with the great circle of the church of God.

First then, **the ministers**, and by this term we mean, as undoubtedly Scripture means, all who do the work of the Lord, no matter in what sphere their service may lie. We judge that neither ministers, ministry nor those ministered to can be absolved from blame; but if we attempt to differentiate, we should lay the greatest stress upon the minister — including of course the writer of this article. — inasmuch as no ministry, whether spoken or written, is likely to be of a better character than the channel through whom it comes.

If any desire proof of this statement, let them read 2 Corinthians 5: 18 - 7: 3, and realise the force of the Apostle's words. The ambassador for Christ could approach the worldly-minded Corinthians, and urge upon them a thorough-going separation from the world, with his own heart enlarged and his mouth opened, because his own life of out-and-out devotion and separation was such as to give immense weight and power to his words.

Many of us may only minister the Word in small and obscure ways, but even so, let us see to it that first of all the truth has its proper effect upon ourselves, so that our lives exemplify the truth we minister. Too much stress cannot be laid upon this. Have we not learned by experience that only the man of solid Christian character is capable of speaking words of real weight, and that such words have impressed us far more deeply than words marked merely by eloquence, or originality, or intellectual power?

In the second place we do well to examine **our ministry**. We would all freely admit that it has imperfections. But in what do they consist? While admitting that they are many, we confine ourselves in this article to one which, working in a twofold way, is a source of much weakness. We refer to the strong tendency to ignore the link between the **doctrinal** and the **practical** sides of truth. We can perhaps best illustrate what we mean by referring to Romans 6, and pointing out therein the three words

we often refer to:- "know" (verses 3, 6, 9), "reckon" (verse 11), and "yield" (verses 13, 19).

"KNOW" stands first, and plainly indicates the prime importance of doctrine. Nothing can be right if we are not rightly instructed in the great truths of Christianity. The believers at Rome either knew, or should have known, the meaning and spiritual bearing of baptism (verse 3), the cross (verse 6), and the resurrection of Christ (verse 9). They set forth the sentence of death on our old life, and the introduction of a new, so that we are "alive unto God."

Then "RECKON," which indicates the continuous action of faith, which accepts the knowledge, and appropriates it as bearing upon oneself, thus laying the basis for new and properly Christian experiences in the power of the Spirit of God. The Spirit endorses the faith, which accepts the Divinely-given position, by giving the experience suited to it.

Lastly, "YIELD," indicating that practical surrender of oneself to God, which involves the complete subjection of one's own will, and of all that one possesses, to the will of God. Without the yielding this will not be maintained, even though the position be accepted in faith.

Now there are Christians who lay great stress upon this last point in their ministry, calling continually for surrender or consecration, and yet fresh consecration, until sometimes, it is to be feared, the doctrines which lie at the foundation of all are obscured, or even very imperfectly held. When this is so, a good deal of result may be produced, but result hardly of a kind to satisfy one who judges of things in the light of what was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ.

On the other hand, to dwell very largely upon doctrine, while omitting, or largely obscuring the definite call to surrender, is equally a distinct defect. The doctrine may be most clearly and scripturally expounded and much helpful instruction may be added as to faith and the experimental teaching of the Spirit of God, but without this yielding, the hearers will after all be left with many a link with the flesh and the world uncut, and what is worse, perhaps without any exercise as to it. They will see things more clearly in their minds; that is all. This, we venture to think, has been a great defect in our ministry.

That a considerable measure of grace and power is needed to exercise such a practical ministry is very certain. Still such words are needed, for most of us but slowly perceive the force of truth, when presented only in an abstract way whereas if presented in concrete form we cannot miss its practical bearing. When Nathan set before David the evil principles that had marked his conduct, presenting them abstractly in parabolic form David listened and approved, and yet failed to see the practical application to himself. The quiet words that followed, "Thou art the man," gave the thing concrete shape and force in David's mind, broke through his self-complacency, and humbled him in true repentance.

It is worthy of note that Old Testament prophets exercised their ministry in the most personal manner. They not only set forth God's mind for Israel, but dealt with the people as to their practical condition in a most searching and faithful way. Nor did the New Testament apostles and prophets do otherwise. The Epistles bear witness to this. In each case the unfolding of truth is followed by instructions and exhortations, which apply the truth in the hearts, and to the lives, of the saints. Should not our ministry be formed after this model? We think so. Has it always been? We fear that all too frequently, it has not.

Lastly, **the hearers**. They must bear some share of the blame, for the parable of the sower applies as much to the saint as to the sinner. Were the ministers beyond reproach, and their ministry all that it should be, we fear there would still be but little result with many. Some there are who seem to be

possessed of shallow minds and affections, incapable of much exercise: others there are, so immersed in the cares or riches of this life, or the lusts of other things, that the word does not become fruitful in them.

There have always been these unfruitful hearers of the word, even when presented not only in doctrine but also in practice, and it is not surprising that in the present day they are more common than ever. In this twentieth century life has become amazingly complex and exacting, and "the things that are in the world," have multiplied greatly both in number and in attractiveness. "The things that are seen," are so many and so enticing, that "the things that are not seen," easily fade in our minds and fall into a back place, though we are Christians.

With some of us too there is this added danger, that we have been brought up from our spiritual infancy under much sound doctrinal instruction, and find ourselves linked up with others, whose position is scriptural. As a result of this we may easily fall into the mistake made by the Jews of old, and assume that nothing more than a correct outward position is needed.

If we fall into this snare, we may be inwardly counting on our ancestry and position, just as the Jews in our Lord's time boasted of being children of Abraham. Nothing more effectually deadens the conscience and exercise, and that practical answer to the truth, which produces fruitfulness, than this.

May God look upon us all in His mercy, and revive His work; first in us and then **through** us. And to Him shall be the glory.