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The Minister's Self-Discipline*

NEIL GREGOR SMITH

AT the beginning of his treatise on patience (*De Patientia*) Tertullian confessed that he was often troubled by the faults of impatience. He acknowledged that it might appear unseemly that he, a most impatient man, should undertake to extol the merits of patience. He justified his endeavour by reasoning that as an invalid may speak feelingly about the blessings of health so ordinary and fallible mortals may speak about the blessings of those virtues which they lack. It is with this justification that a minister who is painfully aware of the difficulties involved in trying to exercise self-discipline upon himself ventures to make some observations on the necessity for self-discipline in the Christian ministry.

I

When William Adams Brown was writing twenty-five years ago in *The Church Catholic and Protestant* of what Protestants could learn from Roman Catholics, one of his points was that Protestants might learn from them the necessity for discipline in the culture of the spiritual life. He noted that Protestantism set its ideals for man very high, and that it had been right in this, but that it had tended to underestimate the difficulty of achieving the ideals and the necessity for discipline if they are to be approached at all. Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, insists that everyone needs discipline in the culture of the spiritual life, and that even the Pope should have a confessor.

The methods used have often been crude, and Protestants have been right in rejecting them, but they have done little to fill the empty place. Wesley did something by his institution of the class leader. The Salvation Army has done something by its adoption of military methods. For the most part Protestants have assumed that prayer was a simple matter and each person could be trusted to practise it in his own way. There has been no rule to which one was asked to conform, and when a rule has been self-imposed there is no one to see whether it had in fact been obeyed. So for many Protestants prayer has become a forgotten art.¹

Here is a problem which all of us who are Protestants know at first hand. In the use we may make of any spiritual disciplines we are free to be as strict or as easy upon ourselves as we choose and, human nature being what it is, our

*An abridgement of two lectures given at the Niagara Conference on Missionary Education (May, 1960), under the sponsorship of the Committee on Christian Education, Canadian Council of Churches.

1. William Adams Brown, *The Church Catholic and Protestant*, p. 329f.

tendency is to be easy on ourselves. A lady who left one of the larger Protestant denominations to join a Christian Science group gave, as one of her reasons, the fact that Christian Science required her to read specific portions of the Bible every day. The church she was leaving, she pointed out, did not require this of her. It is not quite an answer to this implied criticism to say that the Church she was leaving would have been delighted to see her read her Bible every day. Her point was that it was not required of her.

One of the weaknesses of traditional Protestantism has been the disproportion between the time and effort expended on securing religious conversions in the first place and the time and effort expended in providing help, nurture, and encouragement for the converts' growth in grace after they have been received. The traditional "means of grace," the reading and the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, are offered in the churches, but there is little direction given to communicant members regarding the disciplines which are necessary if these are really to be means of grace. Many Protestants assume that they can take them or leave them, and nobody seems very much concerned that so many do leave them. There is a tendency to suppose that one great act of decision and commitment is all that is necessary to assure a full-orbed Christian life, and that this decision is a step that puts us on an escalator which will lift us automatically to the heavenly places. No one would belittle the importance of a decisive act of commitment; but such a decision for discipleship commits us to the making of a whole series of decisions, which go on all through life, and which are by no means always easy to make. We Protestants have had a great deal to say about the Pauline word: "By grace ye are saved through faith." We have not had nearly as much to say about another word which is equally Pauline: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means when I have preached to others I should be myself a castaway."

The lack of spiritual disciplines, which marks Protestantism generally, is felt acutely in the ranks of the Protestant ministry. The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church are required to read the daily offices of the Breviary. Day by day they have access to the treasures of the Psalter and a rich collection of prayers and devotional readings. The clergy of the Church of England are expected to read the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer daily, which means that they go through the Psalter once a month, and the greater part of the Bible once a year. The rest of us are left largely to our own devices. It is reported that at a denominational convention the delegates were asked to indicate the amount of time spent, on the average, in private prayer. Despite the widespread tendency towards inflation in figures given in ecclesiastical statistics, the answers indicated that the average time spent in private prayer was about three minutes daily. Like the worthy workmen of Ecclesiasticus our prayers may be in the work of our hands, but it may be suspected that the spending of so little time directly in spiritual exercises can be a serious handicap to us. Nolan B. Harmon, in his work on *Ministerial*

Ethics and Etiquette, has drawn attention to our common temptation to allow our devotional life to deteriorate:

A man's very familiarity with sacred things may breed, not contempt, but spiritual obtuseness. The Bible becomes a quarry out of which to dig texts, not a reservoir for personal spiritual refreshment. Prayer is something done for others, not for oneself. The lives of the saints, the rich devotional writings . . . of classic worthies of the past become sermonic material with which to stir others, not the heart throbs out of which life may be made: and we become—God forgive us—professional.²

Our Protestant churches have long expressed their desire to have the services of "a learned and godly ministry." In practice it would seem that there are more encouragements offered and more helps provided to assist us in becoming learned than to assist us in becoming godly.

II

There are penalties we pay for this neglect of spiritual discipline. The usefulness of our abilities and our learning may be short-circuited by the growth of flaws of character. In *Jane Eyre* we are told of the reactions of a parishoner to the eloquent preaching of the Rev. St. John Rivers:

The heart was thrilled, the mind astonished by the power of the preacher: neither were softened. Throughout there was a strange bitterness, an absence of consolatory gentleness. . . . Instead of feeling better, calmer, more enlightened by his discourse, I experienced an inexpressible sadness: for it seemed to me that the eloquence had sprung from a depth where there lay turbid dregs of disappointment—where moved troubled impulses of insatiate yearnings and disquieting aspirations. . . . I was sure that St. John Rivers had not yet found the peace of God that passeth understanding: he had no more found it than I had.³

The turbid dregs of disappointment, the resentments we have nursed, the bitterness caused by the little hurts we carry with us to our graves—all these in various combinations can impair our spiritual health and vitiate the usefulness of our ministries.

We are exposed in the Christian ministry to all the temptations which the flesh is heir to. Some take on an aggravated form because we have to meet them in solitariness. We give pastoral counselling, but there is no one to counsel us. Service in the Church often puts us in the position of competing, or appearing to compete, with our brethren. There is rivalry among us for the more desirable pastorates and for the positions of influence and power in our denominations. However sincere we may be in our desire to serve the Church of Jesus Christ and render a faithful stewardship of our gifts, few of us can claim that we are not motivated to some extent by the appeals of larger stipends and increased prestige. Daniel D. Walker, in *The Human Problems of the Minister*, suggests that like the poor who are with us always, the status-seeker is always likely to be with us in the Church.

2. Nolan B. Harmon, *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette*, p. 46.

3. Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, Chap. 30.

In all denominations the way in which a man assigned to a church often seems compelled to compete with his predecessor by telling what bad shape he found the records in, or how many people were glad to see the change, is embarrassing. And even denominational executives, after they have been elected, and presumably have reached the top rung of the ladder, are not free to enjoy the spiritual fellowship of a ministry untarnished by personal ambitions and the drive to stand at the top. They vie with one another for key committee assignments and membership on principal boards: intense jealousies are sometimes found among their wives, who insist on their prerogatives: they are often over-conscious of the popularity of other church leaders and they pull strings to gain additional advantages.⁴

We could lay this flattering unction to our souls that Mr. Walker was describing conditions which exist in the American church. We know too well, however, that such conditions exist in all churches. In all of them ambitious men reflect sometimes upon the necessity of cultivating the acquaintance of the right people, pulling the right strings, and playing their cards properly to get ahead in the church. This goes on even in churches which assert the parity of ministers, yet also assert in practice that some are a little more equal than others. Even in the church of the apostles there was a man named Diotrophes who wanted to have pre-eminence; and even in the company of the twelve disciples there were two who wanted the best positions in the Lord's kingdom.

We have no monopoly on this professional rivalry, with its concomitants of envy and uncharitableness. There was a proverb current among the Greeks, "Praise not to the potter another potter's pots," which suggests that the trait of professional rivalry was not unknown to the Greek potters. Sir William Osler noted its prevalence among physicians, and spoke of it as being "more disastrous than intemperance, because destructive of all mental and moral nobility." It is natural and wholesome to have an ambition to excel in work we undertake. We would be poor creatures without some such ambition. It is no solution to the problem to tell us to fling away ambition, as the sin by which the angels fell. Is it not much more wholesome to direct it, in self-discipline, into useful and constructive channels? St. Paul counselled that ambitious young cleric, Timothy, to study or, as it may be rendered, be ambitious to show himself approved unto God. To keep ambition focused on this high goal in a competitive society requires self-discipline of the highest order. When it gets out of control it appears in various unlovely forms. "The neurotic minister," wrote Stolz, "is prone to sacrifice the Christian qualities of love, service, and humility, on the altar of rivalry. If he gains power and admiration he is likely to become anxious lest he lose his gains. If he fails he feels depressed, defeated, scorned and frustrated."⁵ The common ministerial faults which are pilloried so often in the portraits of ministers in fiction, and which appear so often in real life—egotism, dogmatism, intolerance, and thinly veneered selfishness—will flourish anywhere if they are not kept in check by spiritual disciplines. Even very brief

4. Daniel B. Walker, *The Human Problems of the Minister*, p. 40.

5. Karl R. Stolz, *Psychotherapy and the Church*, p. 236.

devotional exercises, consistently followed, offer help for us in our problems of self-discipline. The discipline of devotional reading of the Scriptures, where we read them not to hunt for texts or illustrations for sermons but to hear what God has to say to us; the reading of devotional classics in which men have voiced their struggles with their doubts and sought to arm themselves for their warfare; the disciplines of prayer, in all the varied forms which prayer may take—all these help to bring us face to face with objective standards by which we may evaluate our achievements and our shortcomings. Their employment brings us, for brief intervals at least, out of our spiritual isolation into a place of vision where we may see ourselves and our problems in the wider perspective of God's purposes.

III

Apart from any other values they may have, the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines helps to give poise and balance to the emotional states which affect our judgments, our utterances, and our behaviour. A pertinent biblical illustration of the consequences of being subject to such variations of mood is seen in the spiritual depression of Elijah after his contest with the prophets of Baal. He plummeted from a mood of elation to a mood of despair. In his mood of despair he abandoned his work, concluded that the cause of God was hopeless, and that life was not worth living. "It is enough!" he wailed. "Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers."

What had gone wrong? It would appear that he was suffering from a break-down of spiritual discipline. His egotism had grown to unhealthy proportions. When a man complains that he is ready to die because he is not better than his fathers, it is fair to assume that he must have thought, at one time, that he was better than his fathers. He had apparently thought that he was going to succeed where all his predecessors had failed. He may have thought that the fathers were a bit dim-witted not to have thought of staging a contest with the prophets of Baal. His own contest had come off as well as he could have hoped, but the results were disappointing. Baalism was still in business, and Jezebel had vowed to have his life. His egotism had been painfully deflated, and he had discovered that he was not, after all, better than his fathers.

It cannot be claimed that he was troubled by rivalry, or by envy of his fellow-workers. He thought he was so far out in front that he had no rivals. He was, however, in a state of spiritual isolation. He thought that he stood alone. "I, even I only, am left." In the grip of this mood of depression his whole outlook upon life and upon his work was blackened.

God ministered to his despondent servant by first prescribing food and rest. Elijah lay down and slept, and when he wakened there was a cruse of water for him, and a cake baked on the coals. There may be a suggestion here that when the prophet had a good rest and a good meal he would take

a less despondent view of the situation in which he found himself. Physical exhaustion and prolonged emotional stress can affect our powers of judgment and bring us to the point where things look blacker than they are because we have lost the courage to face them. Prophets who are tempted to join the "We've Had It" school might sometimes be well advised to have a good rest and a good meal before giving voice to dismal utterances about the decay of manners and morals in contemporary society.

When the prophet had been refreshed with food and with the sleep that is "the balm of hurt minds" and "chief nourisher in life's feast," he was summoned to go and stand upon the mount before the Lord. Here is a sound prescription for many of our moods of frustration and discouragement—to stand upon the mount before the Lord. Any spiritual discipline which brings us for even a few brief moments into the presence of God may help us to see our problems and ourselves in an altered perspective.

Then, at the end, the prophet was reminded that he was not, after all, alone: "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." Elijah was not quite as important in the scheme of things as he had fancied himself to be when he thought that he stood alone. He was reminded that there were others who shared his faith and his concern. With one of these thousands at his side he went back to the work he had been prepared to abandon.

The regular practice of some form of spiritual discipline can have something of the same therapeutic value as this experience of Elijah. For the minister who has so often to contend with fluctuating moods and emotional strains the spiritual disciplines which open our eyes to the wonders of God's wisdom and God's patience can be an effective call to stand upon the mount before the Lord.

IV

There is, of course, difficulty in finding time for such exercises in spiritual discipline. In the pattern of our lives it may be difficult to have set times for devotional exercises, although most of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would have to admit that we could have more regularity in such practices if we were really concerned about them. Our tendency is to alternate between extremes of spiritual apathy and spiritual zeal. At one extreme, often in abject penitence for past failures, we outline for ourselves a program of devotional exercises which would require the leisure of a monastic establishment to carry out. We weary of it, or find it impossible to follow, and then go for intervals without anything. It is advisable to prescribe for ourselves a course of devotional exercises modest enough in its demands upon our time to permit us to follow it consistently. There is then a much better prospect of our disciplining ourselves to keep to the program, and to follow it through whether we like it or not.

The finding of time for devotional practices, and indeed the whole

problem of our use of time, is basically a spiritual issue, involving our stewardship of one of God's precious gifts—the gift of time. We cannot do very much about delimiting our work loads, or stretching out the time available for them, but most of us could do something towards plugging the leaks through which our time is wasted. One step towards plugging the leaks may be to cultivate the habit of intense concentration upon the task in hand. In the work of the ministry we often have many irons in the fire at the same time. Many projects have a claim upon our attention. There is a strong temptation to let our minds drift to various other projects while we have one before us. We start thinking about decisions we made yesterday, or decisions we will have to make tomorrow, and take twice as long as necessary to make up our minds about finishing the job that is before us now. Another step towards plugging the leaks is to cultivate the habit of decisiveness in our decisions. In making decisions about complicated problems there is often a wasteful procrastination about coming to a final judgment, even after all the evidence is in. While it may be a grievous fault to develop the impeusosity which leaps to decision without taking pains to collect and evaluate the evidence on which a sound decision should be made, it can also be a time-consuming fault to postpone the making of decisions because we are unable to make up our minds. We may hope that it will be easier to make up our minds tomorrow, but tomorrow will bring its own tasks. When the case of Guido was carried to the Pope in *The Ring and the Book*, the Pope realized that his judgment was to be the final one. The evidence was confusing to him, as it was to those who had tried the case in the lower courts. He was aware that he might err in his judgment, and that there could be no appeal from his judgment, but he had to make up his mind. Browning represents him as saying, after he had concluded that Guido was guilty:

In after time,
 If some acuter wit, fresh probing, sound
 This multifarious mass of words and deeds
 Deeper, and reach through guilt to innocence,
 I shall face Guido's ghost nor blench a jot.
 God, who set me to judge thee, meted out
 So much of judging faculty, no more.
 Ask him if I was slack in use thereof.

This is a healthy-minded attitude to take towards such decisions as we have to make. We have so much of judging faculty, no more. We may make mistakes in exercising it, but it can be an even more serious fault to be slack in its use.

A final step towards avoiding waste of time is to learn to desist from re-making and re-considering decisions already made. Whether we regret them or approve of them, when our decisions have been made their consequences begin to work themselves out. As Esau discovered when he realized the value of the birthright he had thrown away, there are some decisions

whose consequences we cannot alter. For them we can find no place of repentance though we seek it earnestly, with tears. While the remembrance of such mistakes may serve a useful purpose in encouraging care and caution, it is disastrous to dissipate in regret over what happened yesterday the energies which should be given to the tasks of today. Through the careful husbanding of the time we have most of us could find room for the spiritual disciplines which can contribute to our own spiritual growth and to the usefulness of our ministries.

In addition to the devotional reading of the Bible many of us could make much more use than we do of the classic aids to devotion. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine, *The Imitation of Christ*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living*, Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God*, William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, the *Letters* of Samuel Rutherford, Amiel's *Journal*, and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* are works which have stood the tests of time and use. There are modern works like John Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer*, and modern collections of prayers, which may be found helpful. There is enough variety in the range of such devotional guides to suit varied needs and varied tastes. *The Imitation of Christ* has gone through more editions than any other book in print, with the exception of the Bible. It was once estimated that there were fifteen hundred editions of it in existence, and it is still being reprinted. It is, as George Eliot said, "a lasting record of human needs and human consolations, the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt, and suffered, and renounced." Another devotional work which many have found helpful is the *Private Prayers* of Lancelot Andrewes. This is a collection of prayers which makes extensive use of the devotional language of the Bible and the liturgies of the Eastern and Western churches. One of his admirers said of him that anyone who prays with Andrewes for a week will pray with him always. This may not be true of all, since God breaks not all hearts alike; but probably there will always be some for whom he will be a helpful guide in the art of prayer.

People sometimes expressed surprise that Alexander Whyte, a Presbyterian divine, studied the writings of the mystics and the devotional treasures which have come to us from all branches of Christ's Church. He not only read and studied them himself, but he urged others to read and study them. His explanation for the catholicity of his taste was that "the true catholic, as his name implies, is the well-read, the open-minded, the hospitable-hearted, the spiritually exercised evangelical." Such a man, he claimed, "belongs to all sects, and all sects belong to him."⁶ The use of such aids to devotion may often tide us over those times which can come to any of us, when we do not feel great devotion ourselves, or when we can find no words with which to voice the surges of the movement of the spirit within us. In the providence of God it may be through the use of such helps that he answers the prayer which rises from us in our bewilderment, our perplexities, and our varying moods, "Lord, teach us to pray."

6. G. F. Barbour, *Life of Alexander Whyte*, p. 389.