

Misfits in the Ministry

The topic which you have assigned to me is a very delicate one, which could not advisedly be made the subject of a public essay. But it can serve a very salutary purpose if discussed before and by a group of this kind, which, as I know from experience, must deal with many delicate and confidential matters. I hope I shall be able to contribute something worthwhile to this subject, which has been a vexing problem for a long time.

“Misfit in the Ministry.” What is a misfit? It is one who does not fit, a square peg in a round hole. I like the German better; “Einer der nicht pasat.” For our purpose it means one who does not fit into the ministry, which in the final analysis means one who is unfit for the ministry.

Now we know the three familiar and customary reasons given for dismissing a man from office: persistent adherence to false doctrine, willful neglect of duty, and a scandalous life. Where any one of these reasons has been clearly established, the course of action is plainly indicated. This is not that which troubles synodical and district officers who must usually deal in such cases.

The troublesome cases are those, which do not actually fall into the three categories mentioned in the foregoing paragraph. Does a man actually have to teach falsely, neglect his duties willfully, or live a scandalous life to be a misfit, that is, unfit for the ministry? I think not, and in the following I shall endeavor to show why I do not think so.

We are convinced that certain men are misfits in the ministry, even though they do not fall into the three categories usually advanced as reasons for dismissal from office. Perhaps we have not expended sufficient effort and time in diagnosing the case and are not clear what procedure must be followed in dealing with it.

For that reason I propose that we try to determine the cause of these so-called misfits in the ministry. What makes them misfits? I believe that, if we can answer that question, the procedure and solution will readily be indicated to us. We need to spend no time on the fact that there are misfits in the ministry; what we need to do is to determine what makes them misfits.

I

The first cause I would mention is a wrong conception of and attitude toward the ministry. Is it possible that a man could graduate from our theological seminary and not have the right conception of the ministry and the proper attitude toward it? It is not only possible, but it is actually the case. This is not the fault of the faculty, but usually and entirely of the person in question. There are some who do not acquire much theology in spite of the best efforts and intentions of their instructors. By the same token, there are some who fail to acquire the proper conception of the ministry and the right attitude toward their holy calling. It is just this fact that, in my opinion, renders a man unfit for the ministry.

But how can it be determined that a pastor has the wrong conception and attitude with regard to the ministry? A disease is recognized by its symptoms and outward manifestations. So, too, a misfit in the ministry can be detected. For me the chief symptom of a wrong conception and attitude regarding the ministry is the lack of the truly evangelical spirit.

Let us first devote our attention to the evangelical spirit in public preaching. The pastor is to divide the Word rightly. It certainly should not be necessary to go into great detail in pointing out that the pastor's primary function is to "preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season," II Tim. 4:2. We are living in evil times, which exert their influence also upon our congregations. In such times it is especially necessary to "preach the Word." That means Law and Gospel. Both must be preached and rightly applied. Here we might heed a word of caution. In times like ours it is very easy to become lopsided in our preaching. By that I mean, we are prone to fall into the habit of scolding about the evils that are rampant in our time; we become extremely stormy about it; we often rant and rave; and we bawl the people out. We have become lopsided; we no longer rightly divide the Word of Truth.

Does not God expect us, as Paul says to Timothy, to "reprove, rebuke, exhort"? Yes, but he does not say that we are to do this to the exclusion of the rest of God's counsel. And he adds that we are to do it "with all longsuffering and doctrine." This requires calmness, self-restraint, forbearance, gentleness and patience. We are to apply the truths of God's Word unsparingly and without compromise or abrogation, but let the application be tempered with mercy!

Some may say: "But we must preach the Law." That is true. Without the Law the Gospel hangs in the air, a house without a foundation. On the other hand, the Law without the Gospel is a foundation without a house. By means of the Law the ground is broken up to receive the seed; the gospel is the sunshine and moisture that causes the seed to take root and grow. We are to preach the Law to bring men to a knowledge of their sins. It is the function of the physician to cure; and he must sometimes use the knife. But in applying the Law we only make the diagnosis, and the diagnosis is not the cure. You cannot expect a harvest if you only plow the soil. Let us beware of a lopsided employment of the Law! Let us not expect to achieve by the Law what can be done only by the Gospel. Neither justification nor sanctification can be achieved by the Law!

I am convinced that the lack of evangelical spirit displayed in the preaching of some pastors also manifests itself in their dealings with their members. But I would like to say a little more with regard to preaching. Here I again quote from my other essay.

We all know that there is a five-fold use of the Word of God; indoctrination, refutation, reproof, admonition, comfort. Do we always note how beautifully this lends itself to truly evangelical preaching?

A pastor is to teach, to indoctrinate, to preach doctrine. Right here I feel constrained to inject a few observations which may be a little beside the point, but I feel they will contribute something to our study. In doctrinal preaching let us guard against a stiff, formal, dogmatical, technical presentation. This may display the pastor as a learned theologian, but it is going to fall flat as far as the hearers are concerned. The hearer must be brought to the realization "This means me; this is for me." So often the preacher says: "This is what you must believe in order to be saved." Instead, he should seek to awaken faith. We must preach into our hearers, not just at them. By doctrinal preaching Christians are confirmed and deepened in the faith, but not if it is dry and cold. That kind of preaching is as stale as a bun left over from a picnic – it is neither attractive nor palatable! Let our doctrinal preaching, as well as all our preaching, be in words that, as Kipling vividly puts it, "may become alive and walk up and down in the hearts of the hearers." The Gospel is warm and living; let us present it that way!

We are also to refute error. That means to testify against all manner of false doctrines. To do this, it is necessary to unmask and expose error. But let us not mistake vituperation and noise and denunciation for refutation. To storm against errors neither convicts nor convinces. Error can be exposed only by placing it alongside the truth, by shedding the light of God's Word upon it. Ranting and raving do no good, only harm. A calm cool, kindly exposure of error by means of the truth is most deadly in its power and purpose.

Some get into a rut by constantly harping on a certain error. They become specialists. Or they fall into the tendency of engaging chiefly in polemics. In fact, there is danger here for all of us. We may become lopsided in this regard. A lot of polemics is heard among us, which to me is a symptom of ossification, orthodoxism. We are keeping our swords sharpened to defend the truth and cut down error, but aren't our hearts rather loveless and our hands listless when it comes to propagating the truth we so zealously cherish and champion?

We are also to reprove sin. We are to do this because God commands it, because great harm would result if it were not done, because we owe it to our neighbor, because of the grave responsibility that rests upon us, because of the examples the Scriptures set before us.

How cautious we must be in publicly reproofing sin! We must not deal with personalities or personal matters in the pulpit. The public sermon is no place for private reproof nor for personal attacks against which the attacked cannot defend themselves. The pulpit has suffered abuse in this respect. We have had unpleasant dealings with cases that have arisen from misuse of the sermon for the grinding of personal axes. While this is believed to be a subtle way of letting someone know what you think of him, it is usually so obvious that no one is left in the dark as to the identity of the target. There is only one way to reprove sin publicly, and that is to make each hearer feel that he is addressed.

When reproofing, we are to be earnest but amiable, firm but friendly, unwavering but unwarlike, vigorous but not violent. So much reproof is ineffectual because it is not constructive; it tears but does no mend; it antagonizes instead of attracting; it hits and hurts, but does not help and heal. Utmost care and caution must be exercised in reproofing. It must be done prudently, wisely, gently, and kindly, so that one senses that it comes out of a fatherly heart that seeks only the soul's welfare. Much, very much, depends on the evangelical application of reproof!

It sometimes happens that a pastor who accepts a call to another congregation makes the mistake of immediately castigating certain evils, of which he was apprised previously or which he discovered upon arrival. He launches the attack in his first sermon or sermons. Surely, it ought to be evident to everyone that much a course will not accomplish a happy solution. We must be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." One must make haste slowly and exercise care and caution. Rome was not built in a day. So, too, if certain evils prevail in a congregation, they did not spring up in a day. If a congregation is filled with lodge-members, it did not happen overnight. Nor can the problem be licked and the evil be rooted out by using the ax and chopping indiscriminately right and left. Patience and perseverance, kindness and calmness, painstaking education and intensive instruction are necessary and invariably pay off.

A pastor must also admonish. Here, too, we must exercise the evangelical spirit. The preaching of the Law does not belong in the admonition; it is a part for itself. Admonition must be grounded in doctrine, else it hangs in the air. We have a beautiful example in Romans. For eleven chapters

Paul teaches doctrine, and then says in the first verse of the 12th chapter; “I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Admonition must be persevering; it requires great patience. It sometimes takes years before it bears fruit. And all the while the pastor must exercise forbearance, remain calm and unruffled, kindly and charitable. Paul says, Acts 20:31: “Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years, I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.” Even the barren fig tree was granted another year. It is so easy to become impatient and impassioned, and as a result, admonition becomes a medley of scoldings, denunciations and threats. All such preaching is of no effect. After all, our Christian religion is a practical religion. Jesus says, John 13:17: “If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.” Sanctification is the final objective of God’s gracious works. Paul says, Eph. 1:4: “According as He has chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.” I Thess. 4:3, he says; “This is the will of God, even your sanctification.” The renewed will of the Christian needs to be nurtured and strengthened and inspired continually. Without true evangelical admonition the sermon is a dry teaching lesson and falls flat.

The final use of God’s Word in preaching is that of comforting. Christians are in need of comfort; this earth is a vale of tears. But here, too, care must be exercised. We are not to bring human comfort, which is quite vain and vacuous and vanishing. Like a drop of water on a hot stone. Job complains of this when he says to his friends; “Miserable comforters are you all!” God’s work is rich in comfort; it has comfort for all cases, conditions, and circumstances. II Cor. 1: 3-5: “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ.”

The comfort we bring must be positive and persuasive. How could we venture and dare to comfort, if we had no divine ground for it! The Word alone can make us certain. Let us use this Word to lift up hearts that mourn, not in a sickly and sentimental manner, but with conviction and certainly and joy. So much of the consolation offered also by pastors to grieving and troubled souls is impersonal, perfunctory, and stereotyped; it creates a sort of stoicism in the hearts of those who mourn instead of soothing and composing them in humble resignation to God’s good and gracious will and firm and joyful trust in His promises of peace.

Perhaps you wonder why I have taken up your time with these observations on the evangelical spirit in preaching. For me it is all a part of the diagnosis that helps to answer the question: What makes a person a misfit in the ministry? A lack of the evangelical spirit, which manifests itself in his public preaching is a symptom of the disease that renders a man unfit for the ministry. It helps to determine the fact that a person is a misfit in the ministry. “By their fruits shall you know them.”

I am persuaded that the following will be even more helpful in diagnosing the case.

The pastor is to be governed by an evangelical spirit in his public and private dealings. Here, of course, we get down to practical issues, down to earth, as it were. And it is especially in this regard that we find cause for criticism and concern. It will not be necessary to go into great detail and touch on all the possible angles of a pastor’s public and private dealings. For that reason I shall

restrict myself to a few general observations on the deportment of a pastor in this phase of his ministry.

First of all, a few remarks on the pastor's attitude and deportment in general. We should avoid putting on the garments of false dignity and chilling aloofness. By that I mean that we should not make our members feel that we are a superior class in the church, who must be approached with awe and obeisance. We have had opportunity of observing pastors in their association with their members, acting as if it were great condescension on their part even to speak with them. It would cause anybody to shiver, not from fear, but from frost. Such an attitude and deportment is anything but evangelical. How different our blessed Lord! He freely mingled with all classes of society. He was equally at home with nobleman, fisherman, and farmers. He was not ashamed of the company of sinners at family meals, formal feasts, weddings, or funerals. The Gospel creates a warmth that appeals and attracts. Pastors sometime exude a coldness that is repugnant and repelling.

Others land at the opposite extreme in this regard. They lean too far the other way and become too free and familiar with their members, especially with certain ones among them. No, we can be friendly, human, and natural in our associations without sacrificing the dignity of our office. The pastor who has and shows a genuine interest in his members and their affairs will attract their love and confidence, and thus find it easier to deal with difficulties and problems that may and do arise. Where one affects an air of superiority and aloofness, people will be resentful and reluctant to come with their problems.

Such aloofness usually expresses itself in arrogant and domineering deportment and dealing. The pastor who surrounds himself with a false dignity and an exaggerated opinion of his own person is quite apt to be dictatorial and domineering. He insists on his own opinions, not because they are based on the Work of God, but because he is the minister and ought to know! He has a false conception of the word "overseer" that the apostle applies to the pastor. Remember, we are servants in a two-fold sense: servants of Christ and servants of our congregation. Surely, we are to be "overseers" who supervise and watch over our charge, but the word is not spelled b-o-s-s! Let us bear in mind what Paul says, II Tim. 2:24-26: "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."

Let us not forget a pastor is to lead, not to drive, his congregation. In this respect he is to be a true shepherd. But when a pastor assumes the role of a dictator and driver, he steps out of character, and he ceases to be evangelical. Here again we need to call to mind what our Savior said to His disciples: "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you, but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." The legalistic spirit and attitude is always arrogant and domineering and ruthless. The evangelical spirit and attitude is one of humbleness and meekness, one that realizes that the pastor, too, is only a poor, sinful mortal, just as much in need of God's grace as any member of his congregation. If we have that spirit, we shall be governed and guided by love and manifest kindness, concern, and consideration toward our members in all our associations and dealings with them.

Above all, the evangelical spirit must be maintained and manifested when it becomes necessary for the pastor to reprove, rebuke, admonish, and exhort individuals. And right here is where some fail so miserably. To be sure, it is not a pleasant thing when one must reprove sin in a church member, but it must be done for the soul's sake. And it is not to be delayed or postponed. When one must go to a member to reprove him for sin, it must be done without first beating about the bush, but coming right to the point. The weather or crops, politics or current events, make a poor introduction to private reproof. They actually hinder and weaken it because they convey the impression that one is reluctant or uncertain.

This does not mean that one is to pounce on a person and whittle him down with vituperation and denunciation. Reproof must always be given without rancor or emotional pyrotechnics. A kindly manner and a friendly mien will always accomplish more than vehemence and violence. One can be firm and still be friendly. We are to help, not to hurt; to win, not to wither. We are not to knock a person down – he is already down – but to lift him up. A pastor is not to be a “striker.” As stated earlier, the purpose of reproof is not merely to hit and hurt, but to help and heal. Even the Law can be applied in an evangelical spirit and manner.

Reproof must always be applied impartially; there dare be no respect of persons. The prominent as well as the plain, the rich as well as the ragged, must be treated without distinction. Paul gives it as one of the qualifications, that a pastor must be “just.” Much trouble and harm have resulted from disregard of this principle.

Certainly the pastor will avoid playing detective! It is not proper for him to gumshoe about, seeking out secret sins, that he might exercise his right to reprove. When a pastor stoops to sleuthing, snooping, and spying, to peeking, probing, and prying, he steps out of character and disgraces the dignity of his high office. Least of all, will he employ the degrading device of listening to stool pigeons and common gossips. Untold harm has resulted from just such unevangelical tactics on the part of some pastors. And the very fact that nasty cases have developed out of such practices makes it necessary and salutary to sound this warning. Here especially we need to pray for a large measure of wisdom and love.

In no phase of a pastor's ministry is there more call for the evangelical spirit than in a case of discipline. Oh, what caution and care must be exercised in this regard! How many sins have been committed against the sinning, what errors against the erring! As one who held the office of district president for 12 years, I know whereof I speak. The unevangelical approach, procedure, and conclusion in some cases cry to high heaven. The crass legalism of some pastors manifests itself in their misconception of disciplinary action. They regard it as legal action and conduct it like a civil court case. They look too much to the outward form of rigidly following the three steps of Matthew 18. They lose sight of the true spirit, aim and purpose of that much misunderstood, much abused, much misapplied directive of our Lord. If they have taken each step once, they have properly concluded the disciplinary action. That's what they tell themselves – and others. Our Lord in no way places a time limit on the three steps of Matthew 18, nor does he in any way hedge it about with technical restrictions. This very fact is frequently overlooked, and Matthew 18 becomes a mechanical routine to which the accused must accede and submit, whether or not he has been persuaded by the Word of God. The club is held over his head: repent and confess, or else! Let no one regard this as an exaggerated picture. We have seen these things happen!

To be sure, there must be a use of the Law, else it could not be discipline. Nor dare we deprive the Law of its sharpness. It is necessary to apply the Law in order to lead the erring one to a knowledge of his sin. But this must be done in an evangelical spirit and manner which keeps before it at all times the purpose of discipline, namely the ultimate welfare of the soul.

This requires love. If we are not impelled by love, but by envy, malice, revenge, we have no right to institute disciplinary action. This is apt to be the case when the offense is against the pastor. Too often love is supplanted by spite, which disqualifies a pastor from acting in the case. If he does go through with it in that spirit, he has fallen into a grievous sin against God and against the one against whom he is proceeding. A disciplinary case needs to be approached with fear and trembling, and with a fervent prayer for a large measure of love.

Where there is genuine love, there will be deep compassion, sincere concern, friendly consideration, gentle kindness toward the erring one. David says, Psalm 141:5: "Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil which shall not break my head." And Paul says, Gal 6:1: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted." To be spiritual here means to have advanced in Christian knowledge and experience, and surely the pastor should be such. The Galatians passage is designed to keep us humble, "lest you also be tempted." And above all, the pastor must be patient. In cases of discipline, as in all other matters, haste makes waste. It may be a rather protracted time until one is able to say: "This person is hopeless."

Yes; if we examine carefully the Matthew 18 directive, we will not fail to note that every word the Savior utters there is shot through with love for the erring brother and filled with concern for his eternal well-being. Where this is borne in mind, the approach, procedure, and conclusion of disciplinary action will be thoroughly evangelical and completely God-pleasing. What a responsibility rests upon the pastor in this regard!

I am well aware of the fact that I have said nothing that is really new in the foregoing observations. But I do believe that a careful consideration of the facts set forth will steer us to a proper diagnosis of the cause of misfits in the ministry. A man may not preach or teach false doctrine, willfully neglect his duty, nor lead a scandalous life, and still be a misfit in the ministry, unfit for his high calling. If a lack of evangelical spirit colors his preaching and practice, if he does not rightly divide the Word of truth, abuses the pulpit, and fails in the five-fold use of the Word, if he has the wrong conception of his office and its functions and an improper attitude toward it, he is incompetent and unfit. And on the basis of what was set forth in the foregoing observations, the unfitness of a pastor certainly can be determined.

In addition to what was just stated, I would like to mention another symptom of a pastor's wrong conception and attitude regarding his office. There are those who regard the ministry as a sinecure. I know it is not always easy to detect this failing or to prove it. We feel it and we know it is there, but we can't quite prove it. It properly belongs to the neglect of duty, but it is very difficult to prove that it is willful. It is simply the make-up of such a person, and he can best be described by the old German saying; "Komm' ich heut nicht, komm' ich morgen." I think you understand what I mean. I believe that it is evidence of a general incompetence and unfitness. Some people are just temperamentally unsuited to the ministry.

II

Misfits in the ministry! They exist; and I am convinced, as I believe to have demonstrated, that they can be diagnosed and detected. Now, what to do about them! This seems to be a vexing question.

One fact is plain. They don't readily come to our attention until something happens and we are confronted with a case. I sometimes marvel at the longsuffering and patience of a congregation. But periodically the misfits come to light. What is done about them? Too often, I fear, we pursue the easy course. We try to move them to another field; we place their names on the so-called Confidential List. All of us who have ever served as district officers know what a pain in the neck that list can be. Behind some of the names we inscribe a note or make a mental note. And I recall some names that were hardy perennials on the Confidential List. Is this the right solution? Is it just and justifiable to take this easy course? I believe much harm has resulted from it. I never felt right about it, and I'm sure you don't either or you would not have requested this essay.

What then shall be done with a man who has been found to be a misfit in the ministry? The duly constituted officers should deal with him. First of all, privately try to convince him of his unfitness on the basis of the evidence presented. If he refuses to be convinced, the officers, after proper consultation with the congregation, will have to declare the man unfit for the ministry. To me this is the only equitable course. It is the only fair thing, for the man, and for the Church. Too often men have hid behind the three common reasons for the dismissal of a pastor and have said: "You cannot oust me because I am not guilty of false doctrine. I have not willfully neglected my duty. I have not lived scandalously." Those who dealt with him said the same thing. Let's be realistic and honest and fair about it. I believe I have demonstrated that there are other factors that render a man unfit for the ministry. If we are all of this mind, the aforementioned course is the only one that can be followed.

It has been said that our institutions should be more careful in screening the students, that misfits ought to be weeded out before they get into the ministry. In isolated instances this could perhaps be done. But it is very difficult to appraise and evaluate students on the basis of their school work and conduct. Most of the symptoms to which I have alluded do not become evident until a man is in the practical ministry. Of one thing I am certain, and that is this: when it is evident and apparent that a person is an out and out pietist, he is a hazardous candidate for the ministry. Pietism and legalism are synonymous and will lead to the spirit and practice which I warned against earlier. In general, however, it is practically impossible to get a 100 percent screening in our institutions.

So the fact remains that misfits get into the ministry. Sooner or later this fact becomes evident and apparent. When it does, it must be dealt with. I have indicated the course which I am persuaded must be followed. I see no alternative but to face the problem squarely and frankly, and handle it fairly and fearlessly. That, I believe, is the God pleasing way.

Karl F. Krauss