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THE CHOICE OF A LIFE-WORK

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF THE MINISTRY

EARL MORSE WILBUR



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“The greatest problem is that of making one’s power and influence felt as much as possible for good in the great world’s movements.”—*Professor R. H. Thurston, Cornell University.*

“The communication of moral and religious truth is the most important office committed to men.”—*Channing.*

“Never was there a greater call in all parts of this country for thoroughly equipped clergymen than now, and never was the position given to such clergymen more honorable and influential.”—*Ex-President White, Cornell University.*

“Despite all the modifications which this office has undergone, it is still a most influential one, and is certain to continue so. . . . A man who does well in it will never lack occupation and influence. . . . Modern society is better worth preaching to than any earlier society. . . . Never had the true priest so high a station or so great an influence as he has to-day.”—*President Eliot, Harvard University.*

The Choice of a Life-Work

The choice of a life-work deserves to be considered, after the decision as to the moral principles by which life itself is to be governed, as the most important and far-reaching question that a young man is called upon to decide. With but one life to live upon earth, and with no chance to make fresh starts except at great sacrifice, a mistake in this choice, involving as it does all one's future career, is no less than tragic. By force of energy and persistence, it is true, one that has missed his true vocation may still make his life a fair success; but when one is to invest his whole life, talents, and opportunities, he should take no risks, but should insure from this supreme investment the surest and highest returns obtainable. In other words, one should aim to make such a choice as to secure his living his life to the most effective purpose possible. If this is true to some degree for all young men standing at the threshold, it is especially so for those whose natural talents and advantages of education make their investment of more than the average value; for with these mistake or failure means the greater loss.

The importance
of the choice
of a life-work.

In making this important choice one should, of course, be somewhat guided by the judgment of

Preliminary
considerations.

wise friends, who in certain respects may be able to judge of one's capabilities and of the opportunities of life better than he can judge of them himself; yet in the end the decision must be one's own. It may be rendered easier than at first sight it might appear, if certain principles controlling the choice be first clearly settled.

The several ends at which one may aim in life.

What, for example, do you mean to make your supreme end and aim in your life-work, to which all other ends, within the limits of honor, are to be made to contribute? Is it the accumulation of wealth? Then the range of choice is narrowed at once to a few especially lucrative fields of activity. Or is it power over men, so that you may make them bend to your will or execute your purposes, and perhaps reward you with position or honor? Then it is comparatively easy to say through what callings you may most readily reach your goal. Or do you incline to consult your native tastes, following along lines of least resistance to a career that shall be congenial, and possibly not too strenuous? Again the choice may seem almost to make itself. Or, finally, is it your high ambition to spend your life and talents distinctly for the good of others, so that the direct result of your life-work shall be a world left better than you found it, and your fellow-men happier? In this case also certain callings will naturally appeal to you above all others.

Opportunities afforded by the different ends.

If I have placed last that end which seems to me to be the most worthy, it is not that I would under-

estimate the others. All may be not only honorably but worthily followed. While wealth is too often ignobly and sordidly pursued, it is in itself a perfectly legitimate object of human endeavor; and it may be so used as to become a means of high human service. Indeed, there has perhaps never been a time when men in command of large material resources could employ them to better purpose than now, in the way of enlightened philanthropy, to the end of human betterment, nor when men were more needed to do that very thing. Nor is the ambition of being able to control the actions and destinies of men, whether through political or other organizations, a mean ambition, often as it is used for base and wholly selfish ends. To direct the affairs of men or of a nation is to use one of the most enviable of opportunities for accomplishing wide good. And the world has reason enough to be grateful to those that have followed the lead of inborn tastes or genius and given their powers of fancy or of invention free play in the work of art or of applied science; while the opportunities of serving it in this way seem only to multiply with advancing civilization.

The final criterion by which these and other objects of life are to be brought into comparison and judged is that of their solid satisfactions and their permanent results, in the mind of the actor and in the judgment of the world. Take, then, the man whose whole object in life has been to gain as much

The final criterion by which to judge of the several possible ends.

wealth as he could, whether for mere wealth's sake or for what he could procure with it; the man that has spent his whole life striving to gain as much power and as high station as possible; and the man that has consulted his personal tastes and inclinations in the aim to live as easily and agreeably as he could. Isolate these from any consideration of human service incidentally rendered; compare them with the man that has unselfishly and wisely devoted himself to increasing the public or private welfare as the main purpose of his life, to which its gains and pleasures have been but incidental; and then ask which of them all will during active life have enjoyed the purest satisfactions, least tinged by bitterness or regret, which will look back over his life with the deepest happiness, which will have won the most and warmest friends, which will be most deeply missed and mourned at his departure, and will be longest held in grateful memory by generations after him. No one can be in doubt as to the answer, which is humanity's verdict upon the comparative worthfulness of the ends of life. Other rewards will often enough seem great and tempting for the present; but the final judgment will be that the purest, strongest, and most enduring rewards are those that follow the life of service. It is the only life that the world long or deeply honors; and it deserves to be noted that each of the objects of effort in life considered above is really valued, when judged from the highest point of view, only in proportion as it can be translated into terms of service.

If all that has been said be admitted, and if it be agreed that the Black Prince's motto, "*Ich dien*," is the finest that a young man can choose to express his purpose in life, even yet it does not follow that one's choice of a life-work is restricted to but one or only a few callings. The avenues of service are many enough; and anything that the great world really needs to have done, from the digging of its ditches to the ruling of its nations, offers an honorable opportunity of helping it in some measure to a more abundant and happy life. Whether you shall choose this or that is to no small degree a question of personal fitness, of which I shall speak later. There are, however, a few callings that men are accustomed to regard as particularly rich in opportunity for those that would serve their generation in the highest way. I refer to Journalism, Literature, Medicine, Teaching, Social Service, and the Ministry; all, when rightly followed, most noble callings, with vast opportunities for raising the level of humanity and increasing its virtue and its happiness. It is remembered what power the journalist through his editorials and the author through his books have to influence or direct the thinking of those that read; that the physician comes at times closer than almost any other to the inmost lives of those whom he treats; that the teacher has it in his power to mold the plastic minds of youth and to give their characters direction for life; and that he that gives himself to Social Service aims to alleviate or cure the

The life of service and the most common avenues to it.

worst ills of society by dealing with them at first hand. Happy is the man that feels called to enter upon the privileges of any of these lines of life-work. I wish here, however, to call especial attention to the supreme attractions and opportunities of the Christian Ministry.

It has often been remarked that the power of the minister to-day is no longer what it once was. Formerly he was the unchallenged leader, having by his very office almost a monopoly of public influence in the community, not only in matters of religion and morals, but also in education, and to no small degree in politics. To-day the pulpit shares leadership in all these matters with the press, the school, the library, and the public-spirited layman. "The authority of the minister is now derived," says one of the leaders of American thought,* "from the purity and strength of his character, from the vigor of his intelligence and the depth of his learning, and from the power of his speech. Candor, knowledge, wisdom and love can alone give him authority." Under these conditions it is safe to say that there has never been a time when a weak, incompetent, and poorly-educated minister would count for so little in a given community as now, nor when a strong, competent, and well-trained one could exert upon it a more powerful personal influence.

What character of public service is it, then, that the modern minister can render? It is his distinctive

*President Eliot, *Educational Reform*.

privilege to be a public teacher of religious and moral truth, a trusted counselor and disinterested friend in whatever concerns men's inmost life, their higher strivings, their failures, hopes, fears, and perplexities. It is for him more distinctly and constantly than for any one else in the community to hold up before men and inspire in them the highest ideals of life, and to speak to them from week to week to such purpose that they shall go away with the resolution newly formed or freshly confirmed to live true, clean, just lives as Christian men and children of God, and to try to make the Kingdom of Heaven a reality on earth. It is given to him (if he be capable of it) to be recognized and looked up to as *ex officio* a leader in movements for philanthropy, reform, and social betterment, and in whatever else concerns the higher life of the community or of individuals in it. His work is thus not merely to discourse upon theological abstractions to those that are interested in them, but to bring religion in its broadest sense to bear upon all individual and social life, aiding the progress of the higher life of men by the most powerful of all the influences known to the history of civilization—the motives and sanctions of religion, and the inspirations of religious thought and feeling. His calling is no narrow one, then, but is as broad as human need and man's endeavor.

Compare the possibilities of this calling with those of the vocations above mentioned. Much as we may recognize the power and influence of the press at

The opportunities of the ministry compared with those of other callings.

its best, yet religion and morals are but a small part of the field with which it has to do, whereas these are the matters to which the minister, as a specialist, can devote practically his whole attention. The physician sometimes comes into closer relations with his patients than the Protestant minister ever does; but such relations are sporadic, confined to times of illness, and may not recur for months or years, while the minister's are constant, and are deepened from year to year. Moreover, the office of the physician is primarily one for the body alone; the moral influence that he may exercise is only occasional and incidental. A true teacher certainly may have great power over the forming characters of his pupils; yet he exercises it for but a brief period upon each one in the moving procession that passes before his desk; and his main work, after all, is also not to develop their moral and spiritual natures, but to store and train their minds. Those that engage in Social Service often seem to be doing directly what others accomplish, if at all, only by indirection, and to be working where the greatest need is. Yet it is fair to ask whether social failure and social wrong are to be permanently cured in the slums; whether the remedy (except for individual cases) must not be applied nearer the source of the evil, and whether the fundamental work is not to be done through the broad teaching of morals and religion, and by inspiring men with those ideals of which Social Service is a conspicuous practical application.

A work
in the realm
of human
character.

The supreme attraction of the ministry as a vocation, then, lies in the fact that its work is primarily in the realm of human character as influenced by moral teachings enforced by religious motives and inspirations; that these interests are not merely incidental to the ministry, but essential to it, and are interwoven closely with all that is good in civilization; and that the minister's influence upon a given company of men is not casual and temporary, but constant, and often enduring through many years. For this reason it can be asserted without reserve that if a minister possessing such qualifications as have been mentioned above will go into any community and work single-heartedly in his calling for five, ten, or twenty years, he will at the end of that time have done more to impress his personality upon that community, and more to shape its higher life several times over, than any equal man in any other calling.

Minor
considerations.

By way of minor considerations, it may be added that, while the ministry offers no pecuniary temptations to the man seeking for money, it assures a comfortable living to the competent, and offers a certain presumption of social position and public esteem; and that no other calling gives more elastic freedom in the performance of its demands, a wider opportunity for culture of mind and heart, more inspirations and encouragements, or more sincere appreciation and love from the worthiest men and women.

The great demand for the influence of the ministry to-day.

No thoughtful person needs to have it urged how deeply the conditions of our time and country stand in need of such service as I have indicated above. When it is being pointed out from all quarters how materialistic our age has grown, how everything tends to be measured by the standard of money, how public and private ideals are sacrificed to the prevailing passion, how the standards of the business world are charged with being generally corrupt, as in conspicuous instances they certainly are, and how often in official life the public weal is betrayed for private ends, it must be clear that there has never been a time in our history when the call was louder for men to give their lives to recalling the present generation to higher ideals and truer practices, by emphasizing those eternal and universal truths that are taught by religion.

The ministry to be chosen only by those exceptionally qualified for it.

It should not be concluded from what has been said, however, that every well-meaning young man that sincerely desires to leave the world better off for his having lived in it, or even every one that feels the impulse to preach, should therefore enter the ministry. Far too many such mistakes have been made. The world is full of posts of service of different kinds and varying requirements; and which of them all one shall choose is a question to be decided upon grounds of one's character, temperament, talents, and preparation. If, as I have said, there has never been a time when a fit man could accomplish more in the ministry, there has perhaps

never been a time when an unfit man was so sure to fail in it.

Certain qualities, which may or may not be important in various other callings, are well-nigh indispensable to a successful career in the ministry. A man must have first of all an unblemished moral character. I do not mean that he should be a moral prig; but his principles must be of the highest, and they must in all circumstances be adhered to without qualification. Again, he must have force and independence of character and strong steadiness of purpose. Often enough he will have to stand with the minority; and if he waver in his course, or look to others for guidance, or lack the power of leadership, his ministry will have little influence over men. He must also have that divine gift of tact and of social sympathy which, without the least trace of insincerity, will enable him to deal with men according to their individual natures, with due allowance for their peculiarities, foibles, or weaknesses, with true appreciation of their excellencies however obscured, and with a deep insight which can find in every man something divine, and therefore something of interest. The minister must have a real passion for service, a large-hearted love for humanity, an enthusiastic interest in doing good, and such a desire to be unselfishly helpful, as shall inspire all his labors and overcome all his discouragements. Above all, he who would become a minister must possess profound religious convictions. He

Qualifications
indispensable
to success
in the ministry.

need not as yet have arranged them in an organized system, nor need he have thought all the great problems through to their end—his professional studies will help him to do this—but he must deeply believe that this is God's world, that man has infinite capabilities as God's child, and the human soul priceless worth and dignity, and that man's sorest need is to be brought into harmony with God's will; if he lack these convictions, the tap-root of his power as a minister will be cut.

Must one feel a special "call to preach"?

These are the indispensable qualifications which the young man deciding upon a life-work must find in himself, at least in germ, before he can choose the ministry with any reasonable hope of success in it; the lack of any single one of them will handicap his whole career. Feeling some assurance that he has these qualities in fair measure, however, may he still choose this calling unless there is borne in upon him that mysterious feeling that used to be known as "a call to preach"? It is to be answered that the ministry should be chosen with the same enlightened sense and sober deliberation that would be used in the case of any other calling; and that anything tending to disturb such a choice is liable to be the source of grave mistake. The most trustworthy "call" that one need look for is the feeling of reasonable certainty that one can do more good in the ministry than in any other work in the world. One may refuse such a call only for the gravest reasons; and if to it be added the persuasion that in this voca-

tion one can also best realize his native capacities and best develop and employ his talents, the call should be irresistible.

While all that has been said thus far is broadly true of the ministry of any religious body, there are also certain especial attractions and opportunities in the ministry of that liberal form of Christianity represented by the Unitarian churches. There is an opinion widely prevalent, and not altogether without foundation, that a minister cannot be intellectually a perfectly free and sincere man. More than a generation ago Dean Stanley called attention to "the increasing reluctance of young men to entangle themselves in obligations with which they cannot heartily sympathize, and which may hereafter be brought against them to the ruin of their peace and professional usefulness." And President Harper of Chicago, in the year before his death, had occasion to comment upon the large number of men who would naturally be attracted to the work of the ministry, but were "refusing to enter upon a profession in which the great majority of those who have undertaken it are forbidden to think except within the narrowest limits." How widely or deeply this opinion may be true it is not necessary here to discuss. Enough to say that it is not justified by conditions in Unitarian churches; for these do not recognize the right of any man or body of men to prescribe a creed for their ministers at ordination or afterwards, nor to limit their belief or change of

The especial attractions of the liberal ministry.

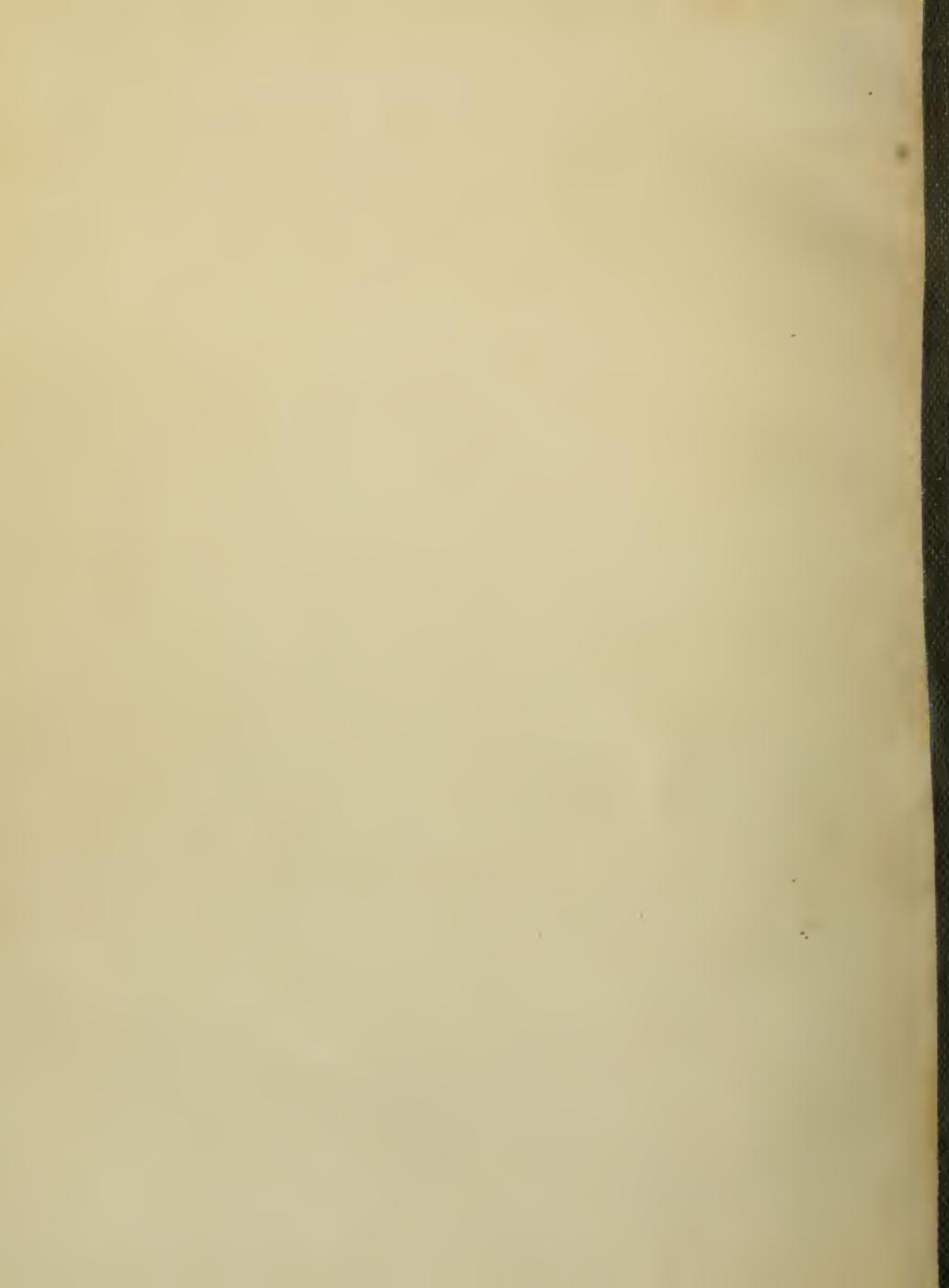
Churches that allow their ministers perfect independence of thought.

belief in any way whatsoever. Here is a body of churches that not only allow but expect their ministers to keep abreast of newly discovered truth, whether in the Biblical criticism of either Testament, in science, in philosophy, or in sociology; and that expect their ministers to preach from their pulpits the same convictions that they entertain in their studies. Here are pulpits whose tradition is for the same broad freedom in the teaching of religion as is granted at the best universities in the teaching of science, and in which inquisitions or trials for heresy not only are unknown, but would be impossible.

These conditions of freedom greatly enhance the service that the minister of to-day can render to men. For when the traditional foundations of religious faith have been so tested as they have been during the past fifty years, when the critical study of the Bible and the progress of the sciences have discredited so many of the older forms of belief, there is no need more pressing than that of free, fearless, and reverent men to help this generation to reconstruct its religious thought in terms suited to the present day, and to present to it a pure, reasonable, and practical form of Christianity, fit to be the inspiration and guide of twentieth-century America; and there is scarcely any spiritual service greater than this that man can render to man. Any one that has endured the agony of religious doubts, or has witnessed the painful struggles of others, must recognize how great a helper he can be who will make God and the soul still vital realities to

The free
minister
in the modern
interpretation
of religion.

questioning men, and who, in the full light of modern thought, can secure to them the comfort, the strength, and the inspirations that spring from enlightened religious faith. For the reasons suggested above, I believe that the ministers of the free churches are better able than any others to render this high service. Theirs is a ministry dignified by a high proportion of illustrious names, which in themselves bear witness to the work to be performed and the honorable place to be won by those that will devote themselves to it: Channing, Parker, Martineau, Bellows, Starr King, Stebbins, Eliot, Freeman Clarke, Collyer, Chadwick, Hale, and Savage, not to mention those still in active service. The demand for men well qualified for the ministry of these churches was never greater than now, and assures abundant opportunity for every competent and promising man. This ministry has high and exacting ideals, it makes strenuous demands, and it offers no glittering rewards; but it affords infinite opportunities for molding individual characters and for lifting human civilization. Can young men of large talents to-day employ them to better purpose than to consecrate them to such service in such an apostolic succession?



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