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Safeguarding the Sacred

William G. Johnsson

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Safeguarding

IT IS possible, I believe, that, even in the midst of a rich ministry, a ministry which keeps us busy doing many things and doing them well, we shall gradually lose the sense of the sacred. It may happen that, imperceptibly, we adopt a worldly mode of thought. It is likewise possible that our worship services may slowly change in character until prayer is perfunctory, preaching an intellectual or entertaining exercise, and the hour spent together no more than a good performance and good fellowship as the Christian "Club" has met together again. Then we are no longer ministers of the gospel but ecclesiastical functionaries.

How remote are these possibilities? I suggest that they are not remote at all; that they loom as engulfing threats in the life of each minister as the twentieth century nears its close. Indeed, unless we are aware of the forces that would secularize the ministry, and are constantly alert to safeguard the sacred character of our calling, we shall, with the best intentions, slip into the trap of secularism. There are two aspects that need elaboration: the pressures that would inevitably secularize the ministry, and suggestions for resisting them.

That we live in a secular age is a truism. What we face is something more formidable than radical theological movements such as the "God-is-dead" fad of the 1960's or even Christian clergy who no longer believe in the deity of Jesus Christ or in life after death. Rather, we are up against a cultural flow, a surge in the history of ideas. That flow, that surge, can be summed up in the expression *the self-sufficient man*. Here we find a philosophy that is totally humanistic: man's reason is the ultimate test of truth, and his technology is to master the universe.

Philosophies that have placed man squarely in the center have a long history. Our age is surely different, however, in the *extent* to which man has replaced God in thought. For two hundred years—since the Enlighten-

WILLIAM G.
JOHNSSON

ment—the West has retreated from a world view that affirms the necessity or even the possibility of the supernatural. In the twentieth century—this era of incredible exploration and discovery, in which man has left footprints in the lunar dust and vanquished ancient enemies of disease—he has never seemed more in command of his universe. As one writer put it: The Godhead has been broken; we are the pieces.

The Challenge From Without and Within

Our secular age would erode the sacred character of the ministry on two fronts—without and within.

Without, there is the pull of the culture that would both explain and judge the work of the minister from a purely human stance. Sociology, psychology, and anthropology would enter into the inner recesses of Christian experience and come up with "explanations" of conversion, the Spirit, and preaching. We have no quarrel with the human sciences in themselves; our concern is that their *limitations* be recognized, so that the minister does not come to feel that what he is doing is wholly explicable from "scientific" method. Likewise with the question of how successful is the work of the minister, we run the risk of falling into external criteria by which to gauge ourselves and other ministers. Ours is a success-oriented society; it is inevitable that the ministry should be affected also. But how to measure the minister's "success"? Will it be solely, or principally, in terms of hard statistics—people baptized, dollars and cents collected?

As serious as are the pressures toward secularization from without, those from within are the more sinister. What we face here is the minister's self-image—how he understands himself and his work as a minister. Take the question of success, for instance. Is the ministry to be viewed as a series of steppingstones, so that the minister who is "on the way up" moves from a small parish to a larger one, and so on, until he eventu-

William G. Johnsson is associate professor of New Testament at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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ally occupies an administrative chair? What of the man who works for forty years in small, rural churches—is he to consider himself a failure?

Inextricably tied to the minister's self-concept, of course, is his view of the church. From a purely human viewpoint, the church is an institution subject to all the laws and flaws of other human organizations. (Indeed, a study of the history of the church can be very discouraging!) The minister, during years of service, faces the danger of becoming cynical. He sees how some men "get on" in the ministry, how perhaps some of his fellows from seminary days have "advanced." Gradually he may decrease in trust of his fellow ministers and come to see the church in terms of politics and power plays.

What we are dealing with here is surely fundamental to ministry. When the light has gone out, when the fire has burned out, when service has turned to time-serving, all is lost. The minister is now no more than an ecclesiastical functionary. Slowly, imperceptibly, he has been engulfed by the tide of secularism.

What Can We Do About It?

How can we safeguard *our* ministry from such tragedy? How may we preserve the key element in ministry—the sacred? The following suggestions may be helpful.

1. *Preserving the element of mystery.* "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," says our fellow minister Paul (1 Cor. 4:1, R.S.V.). There is a deep truth in his words, viz., that the work of the Christian minister must always embrace a transcendent dimension. Rudolf Otto, in his *The Idea of the Holy*, has a picturesque term to describe deity: *mysterium tremendum*. That is, our work constantly involves the supernatural, that which will forever present a mystery to mankind, even God!

It seems to me that we must continually examine our thinking if we are to resist the secular tide. Over and over we

must address these questions to ourselves in frank appraisal: (a) What am I doing that could not be done by self-sufficient man? That is, what, if anything, is distinct in my ministry? (b) How do I view myself—as an ecclesiastical functionary, or as a steward of the mysteries of God? (c) Is *God* central, peripheral, or absent from my ministry?

2. *The ministry of the Word.* In Acts 6:4 there is an eye-catching description of the apostles' view of ministry: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word" (R.S.V.). Significantly, the closing advice of Paul to Timothy echoes this thought: it is Scripture that makes the man of God "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, R.S.V.).

The modern training of the minister requires that he gain knowledge in administration, psychology, counseling, and sociology. Given the nature of the times, with the tremendous growth in knowledge and the ever-increasing complexity of the pastor's role, it is altogether fitting that such instruction be given. But a caveat must be sounded: Is the minister *more than* an administrator, counselor, or social worker? Surely he runs the risk that he will not be any more than those, and hence develop a secularized ministry.

What then is *unique* in his training and ministry? Is it not in the apostles' term "the ministry of the Word"? That is, the minister is one whose whole life and service is to be grounded in the Word, nurtured by the Word, informed from the Word. It is because of the Word that he *preaches* (not merely lectures or entertains), he *evangelizes* (not merely performs acts of mass persuasion), he *shepherds* (not merely counsels), he *serves* (not merely works for an organization).

Let us face the stark reality: any minister who consistently neglects the personal study of the Word cannot impart the Word. Whatever he imparts will fall short of the divine plan for him; he will be on the way to a secularized ministry.

3. *Dependence on the Spirit.* Writing to the Corinthian converts, Paul has this description of the change in their life style and the manner of its coming: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11, R.S.V.). Jesus Himself spoke of the Spirit's role in this way: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

As Christian ministers, we must emphatically deny the concept of the self-sufficient man. We deny it for humanity in the mass—all need salvation by grace alone—and we deny it in our work. Constantly we must remind ourselves that spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14), that only by the Holy Spirit can any man truly call Jesus "Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3). We must daily plead with our God that ours may be a ministry empowered by the Spirit.

4. *Passionate concern for humanity.* Acts 10:38 sums up the ministry of the Master like this: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; . . . he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (R.S.V.).

But do not many social workers have a deep concern for humanity? May not even secular man become involved in humanitarian acts? We do not deny both possibilities, but we affirm the *unique* character of Christian ministry: it is done in the pattern and power of the One who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), the One who did not grasp at equality with God but who emptied Himself to take on the form of a slave (Phil. 2:5-11).

With such motivation, Christian ministry can never degenerate into putting in hours, trying to gather data for a report, or money-grubbing. It will remain bright with the life of Jesus, the Friend and Helper of humanity.

Mystery (God), the Word, the Spirit, selfless service—the centrality of these elements will safeguard us from the perils of secularization of ministry. Then we will be able to teach our congregations the difference between the sacred and the profane (Eze. 44:23). Then we will be able to lead them in the highest activity of mankind—worship. Then we will not gauge our success by the kind of area in which we are called to labor. Then we will preserve the holy character of the office to which we have been called. ■

How Do You

WHAT IS IT?

The most frequently encountered infection in America today,¹ it affects children much more than adults. Children are the usual source of transmission in the home and in the community.

You guessed it—the common cold. Some 111 million days are lost from school each year because of acute respiratory illnesses. These are more than 50 percent of all the days lost because of illness.²

The all-too-familiar common cold, with its throat irritation, runny nose, and watery eyes, is the work of some kind of virus, as are laryngitis, croup, and bronchitis. Tonsillopharyngitis, or inflamed, red, swollen tonsils and throat, can be caused by a bacterium or a virus. Fever blisters (cold sores) and canker sores are caused by a virus (herpes simplex). As with the common cold, there are many viruses and some bacteria that produce pneumonia. As one can readily see, the majority of respiratory infections are caused by viruses.³

In an extremely thorough investigation, Dr. S. West⁴ and her associates at Johns Hopkins have just reviewed all the reports of use of antihistamines to treat the common cold listed in the *Indicus Medicus* (the most complete medical reference source) since 1947. She found that 94 percent of those who consult a physician for a cold leave with a prescription. One third of these prescriptions contain an antihistamine. Three and one-half million prescriptions were written in 1972 for cough and cold preparations containing antihistamines. During that same year, \$600 million was spent in this country for nonprescription cough and cold remedies. And with what results? Dr. West states: "There appears to be little valid evidence that antihistamines have any effect on the common cold," and continues, "There is large patient demand for some form of physician intervention in this discomfort. Prescribing antihistamines, as fairly innocuous drugs, is an understandable choice to meet patient demands and placate harried physicians."