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Men in the Service of God

A trilogy of short addresses to ministers in the three stages of life

BY RUDOLPH F. H. NORDEN

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the Epistle to the Hebrews Jesus Christ is declared to be "the same yesterday, today, and forever." Unlike our Master and Chief Shepherd, we, His underlings, are subject to time as we progress toward the world to come. The usual division of time into past, present, and future unites us all in common experience. There is a longer or shorter *past* for all age groups here represented, the same *present* to challenge us all, and a bright *future* for each one, whether he face dawn, noon, or dusk in life's little day.

When we say time affects us all, we have in mind another division of human time, namely, youth, middle age, and old age. In His vineyard, the church, God employs men of all three age brackets. There is a place, a "service station," if you please, for you and me in the kingdom of Christ regardless of relative youth or seniority. We who meet for this conference represent a cross-sectional group, including men in youth, in life's prime, and in ripe maturity. Though, with respect to age, as in the instance of St. Paul and Timothy, some of us could be fathers and sons to one another, we are in spirit brothers all. Therefore we have a message for all as we give the honor of Holy Scripture to God's ministers in the three age categories.

I

THE YOUNG PASTOR — THE CHURCH NEEDS HIS ZEAL

Text: "Let no man despise thy youth" (1 Tim. 4:12).

We lead off with an evaluation of the young minister, taking as our guide the words of St. Paul to youthful Timothy. No doubt we

have often cited this verse in counseling young people, reminding them that the congregation and they themselves should not regard their youthfulness as a handicap or excuse when it comes to serving God here and now. Let us apply this truth also to young pastors, for it was to one of them — to Timothy — that it was originally addressed. Young Timothy met the qualifications of an effective minister because he was "an example to the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." We can be sure that he took St. Paul's advice to "give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." The young minister who today is faithful in these things is worthy of double honor.

Moreover, youth has definite assets to be underscored as the strong points of our young men in the ministry. There is a certain "romanticism" or idealism which somehow becomes dimmed in later years. The young man recently graduated from a theological seminary has high ideals and means to express them in practice in his ministry. Instead of lowering standards to meet conditions as found in frail and sinful people, he means to raise parish levels to meet these ideals. Let us esteem this idealism as a gift of the Spirit. It is easy to throw a wet blanket on a young minister's enthusiasm by saying: "He'll get over it. He'll get his horns knocked off in time. He'll see how impossible it is to apply his theoretical seminary training to practice."

I would remind you that we should all preserve our high ideals and principles and translate them into action; of course, not in the spirit of legalism but of love. One of our seminary professors said that young pastors were the most conscientious in applying Scriptural principles to their work, because what they had learned about various matters was still fresh in their minds and consciences. Another said: Some pastors gradually deteriorate, never again attaining the intellectual and spiritual heights reached when they left the seminary. Then it was visions, dreams, courage, and fearlessness in wrestling with evil. They went forth as Christ's crusaders who hated compromise and pledged total commitment to God's Word. But the work in the field was not easy. Inertia and local traditions barred the path of progress. People were slow in responding. Sin was ever present in the members of the congregation. Satan built his chapel next door to the church. Conditions like

these can wear down a man's ideals. We are tempted to take our head out of the clouds and plant our feet in the clay. Yes, we become battle-worn.

To prevent the breakdown of morale, we need to pray that God would renew our youth like the eagle's. We need to associate with young people and young pastors to learn again their zest for the Lord's cause. I myself have often prayed that God might let me recapture the high hopes that were mine when I was ordained.

A further asset of the young minister is his physical stamina. Strength and power of endurance are at their peak in this time of life. Every pastor knows the great amount of energy needed to discharge his manifold duties. Happy is the young man blest with sound health.

There are other gifts God gives especially to the young Timothys. Instead of overcaution and hindsight, youth has optimism and assurance of success under God. When young pastors are guided by the spirit of consecration, these qualities will enable them to do the works of God. That freshness of approach, undergirded by confidence, is already the first installment on the success of an undertaking.

We like to recall, too, the excellent work done by young pastors. Usually clerical fledglings, when pushed out of the nest, land on rough surroundings. They are usually sent to the church's frontier and firing line. These are not only the foreign mission fields but also the many communities in the homeland. Small salaries, inadequate facilities, inconvenient parsonages, long distances to travel, multitudinous duties that make them pastors, teachers, organists, choir leaders, and janitors all rolled up into one, are among difficulties they take in their stride. These men work not at an office desk with typewriter and telephone, but out in the field and close to the grass roots. They deal directly with the people who have the souls, and they love it. You hear many a minister say that his first charge, with all its hardships and humble beginnings, is his first love. They are prompted to say, "The love of Christ constraineth us." Let us give recognition to these young men whom God uses in His service.

In other vocations young men have made their mark. Alexander Hamilton was 32 years old when he became Secretary of the

Treasury. Long before his 20th year Edison was a recognized scientist and inventor, more by perspiration than inspiration. Bach became court organist at Weimar when 22. The first to separate uranium-235 was a 27-year-old physicist, Dr. Alfred Nier. Likewise young men have been champions for Christ in tender age. Athanasius was but a 26-year-old deacon when he was contending for orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea. Luther was 34 when he began the Reformation. Walther was 30 when with sound, Scriptural theses he brought order out of chaos in Perry County, Mo. Who could mention all the important services rendered by young pastors, young missionaries, and young instructors? As brethren we honor one another and despise no one because of his youth.

II

THE MIDDLE-AGED PASTOR — THE CHURCH NEEDS HIS STABILITY

Text: "Forty years old was I when Moses, the servant of the Lord, sent me from Kadesh-barnea to espy out the land" (Joshua 14:7).

It has been said life begins at 40. We might say that middle age begins at about that time. All things being equal, it is during this period of life that a man reaches his prime. The "storm and stress" time of youth is over. In middle age people have the feeling of being established in their home, community, and profession. Considerable experience has been acquired. Much has been learned from the books of life. All this gives a better perspective of tasks before us. It makes for mature judgment, so that men of 40 or over are valuable to the institutions of which they are a part. Memory reaches back to many accomplished deeds. At the same time there is plenty to look forward to: many more years of service if God wills it.

People of middle age represent the median generation. There is, on the one hand, the generation of children and adolescents and, on the other, the generation of old people. Between them are the middle-of-the-road people, individuals in middle life. This is the generation of parents on whom so much depends. These are the backbone of the nation and the church.

We have spoken of the assets of young pastors. Let us now offer

a few thoughts on middle-aged ministers. Our type is Joshua, that great man of God and ruler who in his memoirs recalls one of his important missions. When the Children of Israel were journeying to the Promised Land, Moses sent 12 men to spy out the land. These were not striplings but tribal chieftains. Among them were Joshua and Caleb, best known because they brought back the minority report. In our text Joshua recalls that he was 40 when the hazardous task of exploring Canaan fell to him.

Men today are sent by God into enemy country to probe it, for it is His will that the Christian Church should possess it. Spiritual reconnaissance is an important phase of the church's campaign. It is the first stage of evangelism. Wisdom dictates that these fields be surveyed before the Lord's army of missionaries moves in. What we want to know is: Where are the opportunities and open doors? What fields are white unto the harvest? How strong are Satan's fortresses? How well entrenched is native religion? Is the country rich in promise? This is what we must know.

Considerable importance attaches to reports brought back by the church's spiritual intelligence men. About 1806 Zebulon Pike made an expedition through the Middle West, reporting that the area was a desert, good for nothing. But potentially it was the world's breadbasket. It will not do to have spiritual explorers deliver themselves of such mistaken judgments. Too much is at stake: the salvation of people.

The minority report of Joshua had God's approval. According to his observation, the land was exceeding good, a land "wherein floweth milk and honey." Joshua also took note of what the people feared most: the walled cities and the men alongside of whom the ten fancied themselves as grasshoppers. Joshua does not underestimate their strength. But what is more important, he remembers the promise of God: "The Lord is with us; fear them not." When a man lets faith speak, he attains to sound judgment and a fine balance. Then he will not fall between the stools of youth's frequent impetuosity and old age's defeatism. Fear, emotion, hide-bound traditionalism, or precipitous rushing in where angels fear to tread, do not mark the actions of the man of faith. Such a man, stable but forward-looking, was Joshua when at 40 he was entrusted with an important mission.

God grants us many Joshuas in a generation of like-aged men. The welfare of the church, humanly speaking, is in the hands of men 40 and over, for these are the men charged with the administration. These are the men who are mission directors and Christian education counselors in synodical Districts and in Synod. These are the men who are experienced parish pastors, matured and seasoned missionaries to be sent into promising mission fields.

Men of this type have many things in their favor. For one thing, they were not born yesterday and will therefore not quietly fold their tents and steal away at the first discouraging encounter. Having learned that Satan's tricks are everywhere the same, and that he can be overcome with God's Word, their morale remains unshaken. It takes more than one swallow to make a summer. It takes more than one gust of wind to fell a forest. One attack does not put a seasoned missionary to flight. Should there come an unbeliever who defies God, maligns the church, criticizes the Bible, the established minister knows all too well that such sniping does not spell the end of Christianity. It has been done before to no avail.

Experienced pastors, 40 or over, make good parish pastors. As wise householders they reach into a full treasure to bring forth good counsel to distressed people. They are capable pastors to the church's young people. Certainly they have not lost insight into the problems of youth, and they are young enough to know from their own experience that these problems are real. At their station in life they have reached stability. What a shaken young person often needs is assurance from one who is firm. The pastor, 40 or over, has reached the age when he measures up well with men who hold responsible positions in the community, with businessmen, educators, and leaders in government. It is this group that exerts a great influence in the nation. It is to spiritual men of like age that the Lord looks for molding the religious character of people.

Men who have stood so often under the cross of Jesus and have seen the power of the saving Gospel in the hearts of men are well qualified to be Christ's ambassadors. May God continue to send men in their prime to all church fields of prime importance.

III

THE AGED PASTOR — THE CHURCH NEEDS HIS WISDOM

Text: "Moses was fourscore years old and Aaron fourscore and three years old when they spake unto Pharaoh" (Ex. 7:7).

There are many young people in Europe and Asia who because of the trouble they have seen are old beyond their years. So much sorrow has been packed into their short lives that despite their actual youthfulness they are old in spirit. Their faces show it. In normal society, too, you occasionally find a person who looks and acts much older than he really is. The other way around, it is equally true that some individuals hide their age. Their 70 or 80 years rest lightly on their shoulders.

When is a man old? Age is a very relative matter and cannot be determined by the calendar alone. The milkman said to me recently: "My brother was refused employment at a paint factory because he is too old. He is 36." There are, no doubt, occupations requiring such physical endurance and quick reactions that only men below 35 need apply. Happily, the holy ministry is not one of them. Surely no one is barred from this office because of the age factor alone. At the time we didn't hear anyone say that Toscanini, the great orchestra conductor, should resign from waving his magic wand because he was too old. Rather, the richness of experience contributed heavily to his ability as a musician. If in such professions age is an asset, should it be less true in the holy ministry?

Consider the case of Moses and his brother Aaron. One was 80 and the other 83 when they pleaded with Pharaoh to set His people free. What a mammoth task confronted these brothers. The release of Israel from Egyptian tyranny was only the beginning. There would follow the arduous journey through barren lands, with all the problems of leading 600,000 displaced persons through the desert. The office of leading the people and of keeping the eye fixed on the goal could be filled only by the ablest of men. Those whom God selected for this staggering burden were the octogenarian Moses and his brother Aaron, three years his senior.

Moses himself tells us in Psalm 90: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow." It was a great

measure of God's grace that enabled Moses to serve actively until his 120th year, and even then "His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated."

It is by the same favor of God that many servants of God can continue their work into extreme old age. The usual retirement age of 65 means nothing to them. And why should it? If God sustains them in their strength, they need pay no attention to the law of averages. It is the mental attitude, and not so much physical feebleness, that makes a man senile. Perhaps the people surrounding him, well-meaning children, for example, contribute to that attitude by insisting that their parents take it easy. The result is retirement from life.

There seems to be a general notion that when a certain number of calendar years is reached, one must automatically lay down the tools and enter on a career of inactivity. It is better to measure age in other terms than birthdays. The man who feels young is young and should stay active. A doctor recently wrote: "A pile of wood and a good sharp bucksaw may be the best medicine for the man approaching fourscore and ten."

Physiologists feel that health and vigor can easily carry on to the age of 80 or more. For instance, Verdi composed *Falstaff* at 80, Edison took out his 1,033d patent at 81, Oliver Wendell Holmes was a leader on the Supreme Court bench at 90. Past 80 was Michelangelo when he braved the Roman winter that he might study afresh the lines of the Colosseum. He stayed young by maintaining professional interests and a wholesome mental attitude.

Under proper conditions age supplies treasures to be shared with the younger generation. The psalmist declares: "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age." Wisdom is one of these fruits. It was a cutting remark made by a New Dealer who contemptuously referred to the "nine old men of the Supreme Court." The nations always turn to their older men for wisdom in times of crisis. The word *senate* is derived from the Latin *senex*, an old man. The council of the elders decides upon the important affairs of state and church. An elder in the church need not be an old man, but the term indicates that originally age, with its dignity and gravity, was considered an added qualification. Paul writes to

Timothy: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine." This is a true proverb: "The glory of young men is their strength, and the beauty of old men is the gray head."

CONCLUSION

Our three meditations called to mind that passing time lays its hand on us, but that we can all be "men in the service of God." Our temporality reminds us, too, of the changelessness of Jesus Christ, whom we serve. He, our Lord and Savior, never changes in His love to us and abides with us always, even unto the end of the world. Let us count it a privilege that we, young and old, are able to serve Him and to make the Gospel of His love known to men. God help us all to minister faithfully with the ability that He giveth.

Chicago, Ill.