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RICHARD BAXTER AND THE LIFE OF THE MINISTER

By Graham Williams

[Ed: *The following is the substance of a sermon preached in Nutfield Parish Church by the Revd. Graham Williams, Rector of Nutfield, on the Sunday after the debate on Christian morality in General Synod. In that debate it was said by a bishop, amidst laughter, that if the motion was passed requiring a clergyman's moral conduct to be exemplary, than all the bishops and clergy would need to resign the next day.*]

This week the press has been full of the events at the General Synod and I do not need to remind any of you of the main subject of the debate. Central to the debate was the demand that the clergy should be men of exemplary morality. It seems obvious enough and yet, curiously speaker after speaker fell at this fence, in nearly every case pleading that such perfection is impossible in sinful human beings. I say curiously, for ten or twenty years ago, such a demand would not have been thought at all excessive, and indeed when I was ordained into the Church's ministry nearly forty years ago, the text chosen by my Bishop and inscribed in my ordination Greek New Testament as a motto for my ministry, was precisely that verse which was read out to us this evening: '*giving no offence, that the ministry be not blamed. But in all things approving yourselves as the ministers of God*' (2 Cor. 6: 3,4).

God expects the life of holiness in all his children. Jesus himself says, 'Be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.' But just as we sometimes say, "All are equal, but some are more equal than others", so it is true to say that the special office of a minister lays greater demands upon him for he is specially called and chosen, to be an example and a teacher to the flock of Christ. As I say, there was a time when such a truth was so apparent that none would question it.

It so happens that the book I chanced upon last evening in preparing my sermon contained extracts from the writings of Richard Baxter, a very famous Non-Conformist preacher in the days of the Commonwealth. His general title is *TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES*, words from the famous charge of St Paul to Church leaders and bishops, recorded in Acts chapter 20. Baxter begins:

Take heed to yourselves lest you should be void of the grace of God which you offer to others. Take heed to yourselves lest you live in those actual sins which you preach against in others. Will you preach God's laws and deliberately break them? If sin be evil why do you live in it? If it be not why do you dissuade men from it?

Take heed to your studies to screw the truth into men's minds and Christ into their affections.

Take heed to yourselves lest your example contradict your doctrine and lest you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind as may be the occasion of their ruin. Maintain your innocence and walk without offence. Let your lives condemn sin and persuade men to duty.

There follows general advice on positive lines in order to persuade men of the truth of the Gospel. But then follows a section headed, *WHY YOU MUST TAKE HEED TO YOURSELVES* and the reasons given are as follows:

(1) The minister's own salvation is at stake. Many will say to me in that day, Lord have we not prophesied in thy name? and they shall be answered with, I never knew you, depart from me ye that work iniquity! Believe it, sirs, God is no respecter of persons. He saveth men not for their coats or their callings, a holy calling will not save an unholy man.

(2) The minister is as prone to sin as any other man. A spark is the beginning of a flame and a small disease may bring a greater.

(3) The minister is more vulnerable to temptation. Smaller strength may serve for lighter work and burdens, but if you will lead the troops of Christ against the face of Satan and his followers...if you would fetch men out of the devil's paws, do not think a heedless, careless minister is fit for so great a work as this. And Satan will rejoice and glory against Jesus Christ himself and say, There are thy champions! I can make thy chiefest servants abuse thee. I can make the stewards of thy household unfaithful. And he compares the discredited minister to Samson, blinded and made the sport of his enemies.

Baxter goes on to say

A minister's sins are more *heinous* for he should have greater light and knowledge. There is more *hypocrisy*, the badge of the miserable Pharisees. They say, but do not. A minister's sin, implies *perfidiousness* and betrayal of all those he has exhorted in Baptism, in every administration of the Supper of the Lord.

The minister's sins are more *scandalous* because there are so many eyes upon him. Eclipses of the sun by daytime are seldom without witnesses, so the minister is not without ill-minded witnesses of his behaviour.

The minister's actions are more *influential*. As he may do God more service than other men, so he may do more disservice than others. 'Would it not wound you to the heart to hear men say, "There goes a covetous priest, a secret tippler, a scandalous man." O brethren could you bear to hear men cast the dung of your iniquities in the face of the Holy God?' [pretty strong stuff!]. *Though you know the meat to be good and wholesome, yet it may make a weak stomach rise against it, if the cook or the servant that carry it have leprous or dingy hands.*

It does one good to go back and read the works of such men as Baxter, for there we find ourselves transported out of this modern age with its liberal ideas and permissiveness so far removed from what in our hearts we know to be moral and Godly, back into an atmosphere of commonsense and wholesomeness. God's Law, God's demands for holiness apply to all men, but it is surely only common sense that the minister, the man called by God should at the very least try to accept the extra responsibilities and moral demands of his high calling.

I must stop here. We can only hope and pray that this week's Synod and the disgraceful state of affairs it revealed will prove a turning point and that in future those who presume to preach to others may not be afraid or ashamed to accept the Gospel's moral imperatives in their own lives, and by the Grace of God prove themselves worthy of God's calling.

Graham Williams (at time of writing) was rector of Nutfield.