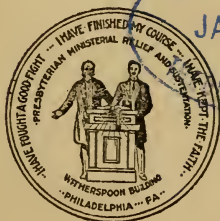


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By Marion Harland



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Should Protestant Ministers Marry?

By Marion Harland

PAUL, the itinerant missionary, contends stoutly for his right to lead about a wife (inferentially, if it should please him so to do), quoting in his support of the claim the example of Cephas, etc. That the right was admitted without cavil in the early church we gather from further remarks relative to the wives of bishops and deacons.

Martin Luther gave unequivocal testimony to his views upon the subject of a married clergy by wedding a nun who had, like himself, abjured the conventual life. From that day onward the theory of the protesting church has not wavered with respect to the right and practice. Suggestions from irresponsible sources to the effect that he wars most effectively who carries light impedimenta are frowned down when directed churchward. An unwritten law encourages, if it does not enjoin upon, the young minister to take unto himself a wife betimes as part of his equipment for the home or foreign field.

The consensus of parish or community is that the ministry of reconciliation—the noblest of what are classed as the “learned professions”—is involved with social and domestic obligations that pertain to no other calling. For the right discharge of these, we are informed

by the church at large and by individual members, a married man is better fitted than a bachelor. The minister's wife is his helpmeet in an especially sacred sense. The Christian home ruled by the united twain is an object lesson no congregation should lack.

A Fine Theory

So far, so fair! From the Protestant viewpoint the theory is flawless, the world and human nature being not many degrees from the status of Paul's times. Will the reader who is supposed to be versed in the Scriptures bear with me when I ask him to read as for the first time the advice in detail given by the chiefest of apostles to his "own son in the faith" called through his instrumentality to the bishopric of Ephesus?

A Perfect Parson

"A bishop, then, must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine; no striker; not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient; not a brawler; not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the house of God?). Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them which are without, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

The whole epistle is a masterpiece of sound common-sensible counsel, informed with paternal tenderness. Student and licentiate of the twentieth century can find nowhere a better manual of faith and practice. Yet we catch ourselves speculating as to the probabilities of Timothy's marriage. There is no fatherly word for the bride among the greetings to Aquila and Priscilla and other friends in the second letter.

However this may have been, the picture of the well ordered parsonage and the portrait of the master thereof have not been improved upon by modern writers upon clerical life and clerical manners. Happy is that parish that hath such!

We have no allusion to the high price of foodstuffs in Ephesus, yet practical Paul does not omit the truth that human life requires material sustenance.

Muzzling The Ox

Harking back, once and again, to the Mosaic injunction, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn," he declares plainly: "The laborer is worthy of his hire," and "They which preach the gospel shall live by the gospel." Lest there may be some misapprehension as to the source from whence this same "living" is to come, we are admonished in another epistle:

"Let him that is taught in the word communicate to him that teacheth in all good things."

Why multiply texts to prove what is theoretically a foregone conclusion? The obligation of the church to provide for those who minister unto them in holy things has been recognized in all ages. The right of the minister to marry is as frankly acknowledged. In a majority of churches the expediency of his marriage is openly urged. Almost as binding in civilized communities is the demand that the pastor shall be an educated gentleman, and his wife a woman of culture and refinement. Paul sets the pace here, too. "He must have a good report of them which are without." The parish must never be ashamed of him or his family. Have you ever thought of the deep meaning wrapped up in the phrase "given to hospitality"? We express it in part when we say that "the minister keeps an open house."

A Miracle Of Grace

To condense the requisitions: He must live in a house large enough to accommodate way-faring brethren and their families; to entertain church societies and "delegates." He must set a decent table; his children must be as well clad as their playfellows and attend good schools. The parsonage is a city set on a hill, and the walls might be of glass, so open to the eye of all men and women are the movements and manners of the inmates.

Yet let me quote from a paper issued by the church sustentation society of a leading denomination in America and abroad:

“Every minister who is duly installed over a church and congregation of our communion is promised a ‘competent worldly maintenance that he may be free from worldly cares and avocations.’” It is significant, I interject here, that the word “avocations” is used in its legitimate meaning: “The act of calling aside, or diverting from one’s proper calling or business.”

Eight Hours And Overtime

“The competent worldly maintenance” is to secure all the energies and time of the laborer for the vineyard he is hired to tend. Your mill hand “knocks off” your work at 5 or 6 o’clock, and if he be a wide-awake fellow, he turns many an honest penny during the evenings and half holidays. The bookkeeper may, without let or hindrance, write up other ledgers than your own at home. There are scores of ways by which the professed hireling may eke out his wages. Physicians, lawyers and merchants ask nobody’s permission as to the employment of their spare hours.

“One man, in his time, plays many parts”—and perchance quadruples his income. Our ordained and installed Ixion is bound to the wheel of his “sacred office” until his “period of usefulness is at an end.” (O, familiar and fateful phrase!)

We have, then, a finely tempered instrument of the most approved pattern, which is not to be diverted to any use other than that desig-

nated in the contract. The natural sequence would seem to be that a fair and equitable price should be paid for it.

In reply, I append the comment of another writer upon this topic:

"There is bitter humor in the Form of Government just quoted when the 'competent worldly maintenance' is a third less than a mechanic's wage."

Nearing The Bread Line

The bitterness is made pungent and the humor of the situation lessened by the statement drawn from the circular letter put forth by the secretary of a ministerial relief association connected with an influential and, in the main, wealthy communion:

"The average salary paid to our ministers in the active pastorate is \$600 per annum."

Of course he cannot support life upon that unless he be a bachelor and his residence be in a mining camp or mountain region where the barest necessities of life must suffice to supply his wants. If a family man must get along upon less than a mechanic's wage, he is helped out by donation parties and occasional boxes of cast-off clothing from richer churches. In plain English, he and his are paupers as essentially as if they were lodged in the almshouse.

Said a rich woman to me with the air of one who, by her deeds of mercy, makes her calling and election sure: "I always give liberally to

the church and other worthy charities. You know, 'Whoso giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord.' As I often say to my husband, 'We cannot ask better security.'"

"Church and other charities!" That is oftener the tone of the rank and file of Protestant church members than we are willing to admit. All that they contribute to the pastor's support over and above the meager stipend we have indicated is set down to the Lord's account—and on the debit side of the sheet. Interest is compounded according to a system patented by themselves.

Lagging Behind The World

Philanthropists write and declaim from the rostrum against the penuriousness of a government that pays its armed defenders a "beggarly pittance." The soldier grumbles less loudly in the knowledge that half pay awaits him at the close of his term of service and a pension for his family at his death. Our minister may be turned out of office many years earlier than his blue-coated brother, and absolutely penniless so far as any provision made by the church goes.

By sailing closely to the wind he may have kept his family in food and clothes. He has not been able to save a dollar even from the stray checks and greenbacks doled out to him patronizingly by friend and parishioner. In his most prosperous estate, he and his thrifty helpmeet have achieved only shabby gentility.

For the remainder of their days they drop the tattered cloak of gentility and settle down to the unequivocal squalor of confessed poverty.

And this at an age when his college mates are touring the continent in their motor cars and eating the plum cake of carelessness!

Do not plead that the church, as a whole, is ignorant of the enormity of this injustice. The church does not concern itself with improvident families unless they belong to the "interesting poor"—the class for which we build settlement houses and association halls and welfare work homes.

For Love Or Money

If poor young ministers will marry poor girls they must take what is coming to the educated improvident. After all, the outspoken old minister was not so far wrong as we are inclined to think—or say—who advised the graduating class of theologues to pick out wives who are "pious and have a little property." It is fast becoming fashionable to deprecate the marriage of ministers who have nothing but their salaries to depend upon. Careful students of varied economies do not hesitate to point out the superior efficiency of Roman Catholic missionaries, and to attribute their success to their celibacy. There is no disguising the fact that wives and children are impedimenta that cannot be cast aside when duty calls to another field. These are spokesmen whose deliverances are not indorsed by

the church. On the contrary, we still swear audibly by Paul and content our consciences with spasmodic relief of suffering consequent upon ill-advised wedlock.

Is it possible that underlying the apparent apathy lurks the belief that more and better work is accomplished by the celibate than by the married minister? That, instead of overt advocacy of a tenet that might scandalize old-time Christians and cause the enemy to blaspheme, we foresee that the end will be as surely gained by slow starvation?

Music And Ministry

Before I, who write thus, am accused of treason to my faith and church, look the ugly facts square in the face and say upon what other hypothesis they may be explained away. Protestants are not niggardly in other directions. There is hardly a church in any city that does not expend more upon music in one year than it subscribes in three years for "ministerial relief and the ministers' widows' fund." A single memorial window that is criticised as a blotch upon the wall of the sanctuary costs treble the sum asked for by the incumbent who demurs in spirit at the task of soliciting funds for the "sustentation" of his needy brethren. Maybe because an echo of the old epitaph sounds through the chambers of his soul:

"As we are now, so must you be!"

Denis Wortman, D.D., the able secretary

of the Society for Ministerial Relief of the Reformed (Dutch) Church in America, has a pertinent and feeling word upon the unwillingness of the clergyman to press home upon the hearts of his hearers the plain truth of the attitude of the church upon this subject:

“Do you know that it does grind upon us to be asking help for men in our own profession? It seems to humiliate! It seems to lower the dignity of the ministry! Possibly with some it seems to bring our sacred calling into contempt. We are exposing poverties many of our clergy are painfully endeavoring to conceal for the Master’s sake.”

A Sister Church

From a report compiled by the same writer I extract statistics that should open the eyes of all but the willfully blind:

“The disabled ministers’ fund, started in 1854, is for relief of disabled ministers and their widows and orphans in honorable need. Assistance is unfortunately limited, by want of funds, to \$200 a year; and may be given only as recommended by classis, and year by year. We seek larger annual offerings and worthier endowment, so we be not limited to such miserly amounts. The annual offering has now increased from \$3,900 to \$8,535; which we are bound to raise to \$10,000, and keep it there, at the least. It has an endowment of \$114,000, which we must raise to \$250,000 at least, for which we ask and entreat

large gifts and legacies from the rich. Twenty-nine ministers and thirty-six widows are now enjoying this relief. Meanwhile the number of annuitants increases from year to year, and will continue to do so with increase of prices of living and the earlier retirement of ministers from active service."

The Dew Of Our Youth

There is pregnant meaning in that last clause. It is set forth, without apology for the bald statement, in a government report issued by the Board of Education. It is headed boldly by the journal copying the report: "NUMBER WHO SEEK PROTESTANT PULPITS CONSTANTLY DECREASING. A remarkable decrease in the number of Protestant ministers graduated from the universities of the country is shown in a current report of the United States bureau of education.

"'It is plain,' says the report, 'that educated men no longer seek the cloth as they did when the nation was younger. It may mean much or little that the percentage of ministers among the graduates of typical colleges has declined from a proportion of 60 or 70 per cent. to less than 10 per cent.'

"An examination of the figures collected at the close of the nineteenth century from thirty-seven representative colleges discloses the fact that the ministry takes between 5 and 6 per cent. of the university graduates, which

marks the lowest point for that profession during the two and one-half centuries of American college history.”

Put side by side with the humiliating figures herein tabulated, the certainty that the decrease in the number of candidates for work in a fast widening field, white for the harvest, is as well known to the aforesaid Protestant church as the simplest fact in natural history, and that it does not incite it to amendment of the wrong which has brought it about—and what deduction can be drawn from knowledge and apathy? As a body, the church is determined not to maintain married men in the ministry? Actions, more eloquent than protestations, give the lie to the professed approval of home sketched by Paul and nominally indorsed by professors of the Protestant faith.

Crowned With Care

It is a favorite trick of business and political organizations to “freeze out” unpopular members rather than eject them openly. A church that affects to condemn papal principles and usages is quietly freezing out the married clergy in its own faith. Without abating one jot or one tittle of belief in the obligation to spread the gospel of salvation to earth’s remotest bounds, we insist, practically, that such work must be done by a man who is willing to resign the joys of home, the companionship of wife and child, and to bring personal re-

quirements down to hermit fare and squatter's hut, while he is adjudged capable of discharging "acceptably" the duties of the sacred office. It has passed into a proverb that the pastor crosses the dead line at 50. His hoary head is disgrace and displacement instead of glory.

Resignation Or What

"We kinder lost our relish for our preacher," said the deacon of a colored church, "so we done sent in his resignation."

The same is done in effect yearly in hundreds of Protestant churches made up of his superiors in race and education. Freezing him out is equivalent to sending in his resignation. If he be celibate, he may have taken out a "limited insurance policy" upon his life and scraped together the premium year by year. He has timed it to fall due at 50, or thereabouts, and (if he be single) he may have enough to keep the life in him for the rest of his weary, because idle, days.

The tale is trite, but none the less pitiful because it is so often told.

Sensational newspapers set "scareheads" above announcements of the rapidly thinning ranks of the church militant. The church is itself apparently content to let the logic of events demonstrate the necessity of a celibate clergy if the evangelization of the world is to go on.