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An Excellent Ministry

ADALBERT R. KRETZMANN

As some of you know, the days of prep school and seminary have a way of fading into idealized dawns and dusks with nothing much in between. Those were the days before Synod's abdication to coeducation, and celibacy had not yet lost its battle in these sacred halls. Engagements were completely unheard of until the day after calls were assigned. Dean Fritz's cryptograms on the summons card had been completely decoded and transferred to the secrecy of the fuse box outside his office door. He referred to it constantly so that there would be no doubt in his mind that you understood the reason for the invitation to consult with him. Kinloch and Bell telephone systems had not yet merged, and the resultant confusion kept everyone alert.

There was only one car on the campus. Its battery was tenderly lifted out each night and taken to bed in Dormitory I. Principal literary activities centered on *Alma Mater* — only to be contradicted by *Pater Bellicosus* (rumored by some to have the same editors). The details of imagined interviews with members of the faculty caused some astonishment even in their seasoned ranks.

Off the campus — and, to some extent, on it — the first "liberals" were rallying around H. L. Mencken, and we regularly bootlegged the *Mercury* on to campus. That was the vindication of the individual against economic privation and despair. We could not sense that we would have

to shift our defenses very quickly to save the individual from moral and spiritual frustration. We could scarcely realize, in those far-off days, the broad distinction between a job, a square meal, a living wage, a roof, a clean shirt and enlarging the individual's opportunity for moral growth and self-fulfillment. Liberalism could not hope to do anything until it had met the problems of survival and subsistence, and then, as the *Globe-Democrat* said in 1952, "The trouble is, we ran out of poor people." We, as pastors, found our members almost undone by success. We had to discover again our deeper roots in the American cultural tradition. We could not allow the economic depression of the '30s and the wars of the '40s to obliterate what was good in the past. Shades of Whitman, of Emerson, of Thoreau, of Melville, of William and Henry James met us at every turn. Here were the people "outside" who had set stringent standards for themselves and their America — pitiless critics of the "GAP" between performance and possibility. If they could pounce on the general style and quality of civilization, could we sit dully by?

The European theologians, brought through the crucibles of wars and disasters, seemed more wholesome and heart-searching than they had ever been. It seemed only honest to rally our forces to combat the complacency, the "official" piety, the emptiness and stagnation settling over our national life, by an energetic and thorough self-examination.

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"An excellent ministry" does not come about either by resolution or by education alone. It begins in an unspeakable loneliness — realizing that we are pilgrims and sojourners in a strange land among husks and swine and hate. There are still memories of love and faith. There are some wonderful assurances — a sureness of forgiveness and the Father's welcome.

"An excellent ministry" begins in the quiet of the Holy Night, and Mary, and the Little Child, and the singing angels, and the shepherds, and the Wise Men. It thrives in the miracle of growing with the Child in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man.

"An excellent ministry" begins in the love, and sympathy, and understanding, and pity, of the Living Word on the ways and in the homes and schools of Palestine and in the temple of Jerusalem. This ministry has in it the sound and the sermons of Old Testament prophets, but now sacrifice and service and fulfillment have been added. This ministry has in it the sound of Jerusalem rebuilt and Jerusalem about to be destroyed. In its preaching it will have to mingle with the hate and with the hosannas and with the hopes of the people of God.

Somewhere in it there will be the wrong church court, and the wrong Sanhedrin, and the wrong judges, and the wrong Roman, and the crooked client prince. Somewhere in it is the beating and the crown of thorns, the wood of the cross, and the tearing nails, the hyssop and the reed, and the all-important inscription, "the King."

You will hear in the background the loud shouting of hate, and you will stand before the deep quiet of death. You will

find the love of confession, and the love of consolation, and the good thief running beside Christ to be with Him in Paradise.

After that comes the Resurrection and the Ascension and Pentecost — all are a part of it — and so are you and I, my brothers.

WE NEED HELP! But who really wants help? I go to the church members and the church leaders — they have needs like others. They hurt and suffer and bleed and die. Surely they know what to do about a more excellent ministry! But there we find the same fears that petrify the latent powers within my soul. There are anxieties that bring into circulation a vicious spiral of other anxieties. There is a touchiness and a sentiment which is almost unbelievable. None of us expects to find pure springs of water, but we ought to be able to unscramble the years and at least find need and an awareness of need. It is still the glory of the church that God gives us strong men who know their need of help if their strength is not to be misplaced or misused. Here and there we will find a loving person knowing his need of the love of the Savior. We will even find a healthy person knowing the Giver of health, but far too many of us who are the weak, the ill, and the inadequate make excuses, feel guilty, explain, and sulk over their ministry, or even become demanding and overriding, and *suddenly 125 years* have been wasted, and the Savior wonders again about our willingness to receive healing and become healers of the souls of men.

We always want to pay our debts on the installment plan — a larger sum perhaps during Advent and the Lententide. Why are so many good ministers and ser-

vants of the human race idolatrously substituted for God? Do we have to name our detractors? Good calls, good offices, great buildings, power, comfort, parsonages, official recognition, degrees, leisure, and a thousand other charmers. Are we bound to the things that perish? Are we a part of man's tragic materialism? Can we confess to a sanctified bewilderment about ourselves? Are we worth the trouble of the Savior and the leading of the Spirit?

- We are never satisfied — or we are too complacent!
- We are always needing help — and always getting into trouble.
- We are always ignoring Thee, O God, and always crying for attention.
- We are to be the real heirs of salvation — are we worth the trouble?

"An excellent ministry" without the help of God is a contradiction in terms. We want help! We were *given* a status only a little lower than the angels. We were *crowned* with glory and honor in the love of Christ. We *have* special gifts and unique responsibilities! We can peer into the vastness of earth and heaven. We plunge into the deep thoughts of God as we hear His Gospel. But we are more afraid about our diseases — more concerned about germs than sin. We are much more afraid of atoms and fouled water supplies, than of offense to God or injustice to our black neighbor. We are slaves to our own fallen, unmanageable natures rather than the free sons of God.

No wonder the modern Greek poet Nikos Kazantzakis condemns us all in his play, *Burn Me to Ashes*, when he has Lot crying out against us.

Good journey, sheep of God! Run, run behind your butcher! He holds an arm-

ful of green grass for you to eat, to make you fat, to eat you!

He will eat you too, but he can't fool me with his fresh grasses; I won't eat and I won't get fat! He'll break his teeth on me!

Here's to your health, Virtue, I know you well now also, and you can't fool me; you're a whore, too, like the other one.

(Lot looks down toward the cities and bids them farewell.)

Here's to your health. Sodom and Gomorrah, charming twin cities, sisters with your gleaming, satisfied bellies, with your painted breasts, with your joyful thighs, with your bitten lips, with your heads overbrimming with wiles, the wiles of freedom and knowledge;

Here's to your health!

You have reached the summit of sin, and that's where salvation begins. You have conquered with the mind the mindless, barbaric powers; you have gone beyond virtue and fear and God; you have reached the edge of the precipice,

Now fall to your ruin!!

I tell you this, and break into tears. I, the ascetic, would love you at night, secretly. What can those rioters know of your sweetness, who cut your fruit and eat of you until they are bloated, and then vomit you up? And I longed for your fruit during the day but would not pluck you, and at night I would bring it close to my mouth,

But trembled, and would not bite it . . .

To your health, enchanting kingdom of man! Now that you will be lost, my heart breaks for you. Farewell, baths, gardens, ideas! God said: "Let the desert be born!" and man said: "Let the fruit-bearing trees be born, and houses, and the cosmetics of women, bracelets and earrings and great thoughts."

AN EXCELLENT MINISTRY

**Who is greater, God, who is deathless, or
this worm, who rides on the sea and
air, changes the course of the waters,
tames the wild beasts, turns the works
of God upside down, and dies?**

**I am that work, Lord!! Kill me! I am
Sodom and Gomorrah! Burn me to
ashes!**

**God does not die on that day when we
cease to believe in a personal Savior, but
we die on that day when for us life is**

**no longer shot through with the ever-
radiating splendor of Him who is King
of kings and Lord of lords.**

**My brothers, what have we done with the
hope of heaven?**

**What have we done with His blessed
blood?**

**What have we done with the chance to
be His?**

What have we done with the call?

Chicago, Ill.