

WHY MINISTERS ARE BREAKING DOWN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 16, 1956 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station W L A C.

In the August 20th issue of Life Magazine there appeared an article by Dr. Wesley Shrader, of the faculty of Yale University, entitled "Why Ministers Are Breaking Down." Those of us who preach would be expected to be interested in a discussion of why preachers have mental breakdowns, but this article is of such a type as to be of interest to church members generally. I want to read a portion of the article to you. I believe that you will agree that it has as much application to those who are church members as it does to those of us who preach.

Quoted From Life

Dr. Shrader, himself a minister, began his article with these words: "In the early part of last year I was asked to help a thirty-three year old Virginia minister who had recently been discharged from a mental institution after a confinement of several months. At the same time I learned that one of the outstanding ministers in New York City had been forced to seek psychiatric help and to take a six-month rest.

"These two men held strikingly different positions in the church. The young Virginia minister, who was well educated and exceedingly capable, had a congregation of 800 members in a city of less than 30,000. Before his illness he seemed destined for an outstanding career. The famous New York minister, on the other hand, had already arrived. A man of middle age, he had won honor, prestige and acclaim.

"These two men of the high calling, though separated by age, geography, financial resources and worldly recognition, had one thing in common: they were both victims of emotional breakdowns. In recent months, case after case of this kind has come to my attention:

--One of the most brilliant Baptist ministers in West Virginia has been on leave of absence for more than a year. His psychiatrist has recommended that he leave the ministry and take up different work.

--A congregational minister in Connecticut frankly confessed to me that he had kept going only with the help of the new tranquilizing drugs. "They have been a godsend," he told me.

--An Episcopal clergyman in Philadelphia is drained, exhausted, washed up at the age of 39.

--A Baptist minister in Tennessee has committed suicide.

--Because of emotional strain, a Methodist minister and his Presbyterian colleague in the same Ohio city have simultaneously requested an indefinite leave of absence from their pastoral duties.

--A Lutheran minister in Missouri and a Disciples minister in Texas have just returned to their responsibilities after short-term treatment for mental disturbances.

--The director of an Illinois hospital which gives ministers clinical training on psychology told me, "The majority of the ministers who come here for clinical training are themselves in need of therapy."

"Cases such as these, as well as the sampling I have done in a number of communities and among various religious groups, lead me to the conclusion that the No. 1 problem of the American clergyman is mental health. Mental and emotional breakdowns among our ministers, regardless of denomination or position, are occurring in increasingly larger numbers every year."

Why Ministers Are Breaking Down

There follows in the article a discussion of what the causes of these breakdowns might be. Dr. Shrader disposes of certain possible causes. "Today's ministers are not lacking in sincerity or genuineness of faith. They are not guilty of preaching one thing and practicing another." He further says that the cause is not financial insecurity. Then, he comes to this: "The explanation lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that the minister's role, as conceived by the members of church congregations has been impossible. It is a role that no individual human being, not even one of the Twelve Apostles, could adequately fill. So long as lay people keep demanding more of their ministers than they can deliver, ministers are going to continue to break down regardless of their mental and emotional health at the beginning of their pastorates."

Next, Dr. Shrader describes the daily work routine of a typical minister's life. The average preacher works ten hours, thirty-two minutes a day; seven days per week. Many work fourteen or even sixteen hours per day. Finally, he comes to this explanation: The average minister "is expected to be a specialist not in one or two but in six separate roles: administrator, organizer, pastor, preacher, priest, teacher."

"As administrator he is responsible not only for the church's financial upkeep and physical maintenance, but must act as general overseer of all those connected with this work. As organizer he must provide the spark for church societies, fund-raising drives and special events. As pastor he looks out for the spiritual welfare of his flock, watchful for any individual who needs his help. As preacher his sermons give constant guidance in the relation of God to man, and as priest he administers the sacraments and conducts weddings and funerals. As teacher he must direct the church's entire religious educational program."

"Given his multiple roles, given the wishes of his congregation and his own concept of duty, the conscientious minister tries to fulfill all his obligations. But the time factor makes his burden intolerable." The result is that ministers are having mental breakdowns.

Now that we have this article before us I want to make a few observations. Hold this picture of Protestantism in the 20th century, with its preacher, clearly in your mind. Along with it, I want you to hold in your minds a picture of the New Testament church, our guide and our pattern. With these two pictures before us we are ready to draw certain conclusions.

Simplicity of the Early Church

The first observation is that when Christianity began, the church was characterized by simplicity. By simplicity we mean simplicity of organization, simplicity of worship, and simplicity of activities. As the centuries have come and gone that simplicity has largely been lost. In its place there has been a constant growth in organization and a multiplied increase of activities, until today in the 20th century the Protestant minister finds resting on his shoulders such a tremendous plethora of responsibility that it is impossible for him to do a good job. Feeling frustration and failure in his own heart, perhaps facing failure in reality, he breaks down.

Two Chief Works

I remember the early church as having primarily two concerns. The first was a very deep concern for the saving of men's souls. The early disciples were not only interested in baptizing people, but in bringing to them the gospel of Christ with all of its teachings and planting it so skillfully in the hearts of men that it would take hold of their lives, changing both their thinking and their behavior.

Men were lifted up to a higher level of living in order that they might be happy in this world, and saved in the next. The early church was primarily concerned with showing people a new and better way of life which would lead them to heaven. The other emphasis of the New Testament church was on taking care of the needy--the orphans, the poor, the sick, and anyone else in need. When you have said that you have told the whole story.

This implies to me that many things which modern preachers are called upon to do are, at best, only on the periphery of their legitimate work. Much of the organization and many of the activities of the Protestant churches could well be left off. Perhaps an illustration might serve to make the point clear. In the old days when the church was new, it was enough to ask Christians to give as they had been prospered, cheerfully and not of compulsion. Now that twenty centuries have gone by churches constantly receive letters from fund-raising organizations saying, "Let us come into your church and help you raise the money for your new building, or other project." In other words, a business organization in Chicago or New York, set up to make money says, "Let us come down to Nashville, come into your church, learn the names of your key people, organize dinners, introduce slogans and techniques, and work through the congregation family by family. At the end of our campaign we will present you with a goal that has been oversubscribed. We will take our fee and depart." When Christianity comes to that it has gone wrong. Unless Christians can love the Lord enough to want to give, it is a bad situation. It is a sick church that has to call in outside professional help to put the pressure on the members in order to raise money for a new building.

This example may well serve to contrast certain highly professionalized church activities of the 20th century with the simplicity of the early church. There are many activities, and many organizational agencies of 20th century Protestantism which need to be scaled down and simplified. When done it will relieve the preacher of a great deal of jumping through hoops and needlessly rushing from place to place.

We might compare the much-encumbered Protestant church of today with the old houses that we used to build around the turn of the century. They had lots of gables and many ornate carvings and spoolwork. We do not build houses like that any more. We say there is too much "gingerbread", so we build practical, functional, streamlined houses. Part of the problem is that too many things have been placed upon the church and upon the preacher. Getting back to the old emphasis and the old fundamentals is what is needed first.

Responsibility Spread Widely

The second of our observations is that the responsibility of leadership in the New Testament church was spread among many people. It did not rest upon the shoulders of one man. Think, for instance, of the church at Jerusalem, which is our special pattern. In the sixth chapter of Acts we read about a problem that arose and how the apostles settled that problem. "Now in these days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring of the Grecian Jews against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. And the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not fit that we should forsake the word of God, and serve tables. Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:1-4.) We learn several things from this passage. First, the Jerusalem church was a very big church. It began with 3,000 members. It had 5,000 men a little later, and then, it multiplied. In the second place, its primary emphasis was on teaching. In the third place, the leadership of that church was spread among at least twelve men--the apostles.

The same kind of emphasis is found when we come to read about the church at Antioch. It, too, was a very big church and it had at least five preachers who were serving the teaching needs of that congregation. "Now there were in Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, Barnabas, and Symeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen the foster-brother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." (Acts 13:1.) It certainly is in keeping, then, with the New Testament pattern to have several doing the preaching in the church. It was done in Jerusalem; it was done in Antioch. That, I believe, is one of the answers in getting away from the problem of the 20th century where one man breaks down because too much work is on his shoulders.

I would also emphasize that the pattern of organization in the New Testament church was not for the minister, or preacher, to be head of the church. In the early church it was a group of men called elders, or presbyters, or bishops, or overseers, or pastors. These five words are used as synonyms and refer equally well to the group of men who had the leadership of the early church. Instead of one man being singled out as head, there are these several men whose qualifications are laid down in I Timothy 3 and whose works are also suggested there. They planned the work of the church. They guided, counselled, directed, supervised, reproved and ruled the congregation. As we study the problem of 20th century Protestant preachers, it is refreshing to see that God's plan, which lays the responsibility upon a group of men, rather than one, is better than man's.

"Ye Are One Body"

Our third and final major observation is that in the New Testament every Christian was a worker. In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul says, "For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." (Rom. 12:4-8.) He uses the illustration of the human body as a means of conveying a basic idea about the functioning of the church. The foot has work to do just as the hand; the eye just as the ear. Some men were especially able to give generously. Others were equipped to teach. Others were equipped to do something else, but everyone was a worker in the church.

Paul considered the principle so vital that he also taught it to the Corinthian church, "For the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ....For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now they are many members, but one body." (I Cor. 12:12,14-20.)

As time passed, the idea of clergy and laity developed. It is foreign to the Bible for in New Testament times they were all brethren, each with a different ability, each doing a different job, but all equally important in the overall picture of the church. There was no "one-man pastor system" in the early church. Rather, a group of men (the elders, etc.) served as pastors.

Worthy of His Hire

This is not to say that the preacher is not to be paid for his services. Paul was paid from time to time when he went from place to place. Also, he wrote to the Galatians, "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things." (Gal.6:6.) Those who are taught should take care of those who do the teaching in all good things. To Timothy he wrote, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The laborer is worthy of his hire." (I Tim. 5:17-18.)

But while it is permissible, and the New Testament pattern is precedent enough for it, for some to be paid in order that they may give their full time to the teaching of the word, if that is all that is done the total work of the Lord will not be done. There is too much work for a few hired people to do it all. The emphasis of the New Testament church is that everybody who is a Christian does something. Together, they do much. Sometimes preachers have been responsible for the developing of the "one-man pastor system"--the problem discussed in the article in Life. They have done it because it means some prestige and honor. Preachers are human, and have the same ego longings as others. At other times the "one-man pastor system" has been thrust upon the preacher by the congregation. A job needed to be done and the church members looked at the preacher and said, "He has had certain training. Let him do it. He can do it better than we." So the preacher has done it. As a result, in many instances, the preacher makes all the announcements, the preacher leads the prayers, the preacher does the preaching, the preacher presides at the Lord's table, and the preacher determines the policies and the decisions of the church. If you want to know anything, ask the preacher. That is foreign to the New Testament.

More Training Classes

The answer to this particular phase of the problem lies in training all the members of the church. More men's training classes are needed, as are also classes for elders and deacons, classes in personal work, classes in hospital visitation, and others. We need classes to train people to do every kind of work Christ wants done. Then, with all working together we can do the job. In the church there is much work. It is obvious in the New Testament that the answer is for many people to do that much work. One man cannot do it without breaking down; one man cannot do it, even if he does break down. One man cannot do it. The only answer is for all to do it. The Lord needs every man, woman and child. He needs those in grammar school and high school; he needs the aged as well. He needs every business man, every stenographer, every printer, every architect, every builder, and every person who has any skill whatever. If we try we can find a place where that skill can be used in the church.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that I want to be excused from visiting the hospitals, or counselling, or doing office work, or anything else I'm capable of doing. I want to do more, not less. Brother Howard Horton, who has just come to be an additional teacher here, as in New Testament times, fully agrees. What I am saying is this: "If you wait for us to do it, we can't possibly do it all!" There are 578 family units in this congregation. That means a great many additional fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and prospective husbands and wives. There is more work than any two, or a dozen, men can do.

With You, Nor For You

I want to do all that I can, but I want to do it with you, not for you. Let us work not as clergy and laity, but as Christians. I want to walk the hospitals, not as a paid professional, but as a Christian who loves his fellow-Christians. I want to be with you when you marry; I want to be with you when someone dies. But I want to be there because I am your brother in Christ and not because I get a pay check that obligates me to come. And when I am there, I want to see you there, too, elders, deacons, teachers, and everybody else who is a member of the church. The only door that enters into heaven for any of us is a door that is reached by constant, daily service.

Conclusion

Those of us who make up the church of Christ are striving to restore New Testament Christianity in doctrine, in spirit and in practice. We do not count ourselves a part of Protestantism, not Catholicism, nor Judaism. Rather, we are striving to be a part of the church of our Lord as outlined in the Bible, without addition or subtraction. We desire to follow the "blueprint" explicitly. We strive to "speak where the scriptures speak and be silent where the scriptures are silent." We endeavor to have a "thus saith the Lord" for everything we do.

Accordingly, let us not drift into the Protestant pattern of the "one-man pastor system" which is foreign to the New Testament. Especially, since that system has proved itself to be dangerous and harmful to the men who participate in it, should we avoid it. Let's not make their mistakes. Rather, let us all work together, as the members of our physical bodies work together, to do the work the Lord wants done. Let us all, including those of us who preach, serve with full enthusiasm and zeal under the direction of God's appointed leaders--the elders of the church.