

The Religious Life of Theological Students

By B. B. Warfield

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I am asked to speak to you on the religious life of the student of theology. It is the most important subject which can engage our thought.

1. Spiritual and Intellectual Fitness

This is not to depreciate the importance of the intellectual preparation of the student for the ministry. The importance of the intellectual preparation of the student for the ministry is the reason of the existence of our Theological Colleges. Say what you will, do what you will, the ministry is a "learned profession". The man without learning, no matter with what other gifts he may be endowed, is unfit for its duties. The minister must be "apt to teach." Not apt merely to exhort, to beseech, to appeal, to entreat; not even merely, to testify, to bear witness; but to teach. And teaching implies knowledge: he who teaches must know.

But aptness to teach alone does not make a minister; nor is it his primary qualification. It is only one of a long list of requirements which Paul lays down as necessary to meet in him who aspires to this high office. And all the rest concern, not his intellectual, but his spiritual fitness. A minister must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work. But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly.

Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs.

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. But why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?

What an absurd antithesis! There can be no “either— or” here (either a student or a man of God). You must be both. Religion does not take a man away from his work; it sends him to his work with an added quality of devotion.

2. Importance of a Sense of “Vocation”

But the doctrine is the same, and it is the doctrine, the fundamental doctrine, of Protestant morality. It is the great doctrine of “vocation,” the doctrine, to wit, that the best service we can offer to God is just to do our duty—our plain, homely duty, whatever that may chance to be.

The Middle Ages did not think so. They cut a cleft between the religious and the secular life, and counselled him who wished to be religious to turn his back on what they called “the world”— not the wickedness that is in the world, but the work-a-day world, the occupations which form the daily task of men and women.

Protestantism put an end to all that. Then Luther came, and, with still more consistency, Calvin, proclaiming the great idea of “vocation.” “Vocation”—it is the call of God, addressed to every man, whoever he may be, to lay upon him a particular work, no matter what. And the calls, and therefore also the called, stand on a complete equality with one another. The burgomaster is God’s burgomaster; the physician is God’s physician; the merchant is God’s merchant; the labourer is God’s labourer. Every vocation, liberal, as we call it, or manual, the humblest and the vilest in appearance as truly as the noblest and the most glorious, is of divine right.

Talk of the divine right of kings! Here is the divine right of every workman, no one of whom needs to be

ashamed, if only he is an honest and good workman. “Only laziness is ignoble, and while Romanism multiplies its mendicant orders, the Reformation banishes the idle from its towns.”

3. The Significance of Diligence in Study

Now, as students of theology, your vocation is to study theology; and to study it diligently, in accordance with the apostolic injunction: “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord.” It is precisely for this that you are students of theology; this is your “next duty.”

Dr. Charles Hodge tells of Philip Lindsay, the most popular professor in the Princeton College of his day, that “he told our class that we would find that one of the best preparations for death was a thorough knowledge of the Greek grammar.” “This,” comments Dr. Hodge in his quaint fashion, “was his way of telling us that we ought to do our duty.”

Certainly, every man who aspires to be a religious man must begin by doing his duty, his obvious duty, his daily task, the particular work which lies before him to do at this particular time and place. If this work happens to be studying, then his religious life depends on nothing more fundamentally than on just studying.

You may think of your studies what you please. You may consider them as servile labour and the meanest work. But you must faithfully give yourselves to them, if you wish to be religious men. No religious character can be built up on the foundation of neglected duty.

4. Study as Worship

There is certainly something wrong with the religious life of a theological student who does not study. But it does not quite follow that therefore everything is right with his religious life if he does study.

It is possible to study—even to study theology—in an entirely secular spirit.

In all its branches alike, theology has as its unique end to make God known. The student of theology is brought by his daily task into the presence of God, and is kept there. Can a religious man stand in the presence of God, and not worship? Surely that is possible only for an irreligious man, or at least for an unreligious man.

5. Examine yourself

Here I place in your hands at once a touchstone by which you may discern your religious state, and an instrument for the quickening of your religious life. Do you prosecute your daily tasks as students of theology as “religious exercises”?

If you do not, look to yourselves: it is surely not all right with the spiritual condition of that man who can busy himself daily with divine things, with a cold and impassive heart.

If you do, rejoice.

But in any case, see that you do! And that you do it ever more and more abundantly. Whatever you may have done in the past, for the future make all your theological studies “religious exercises.”

This is the great rule for a rich and wholesome religious life in a theological student. Put your heart into your studies; do not merely occupy your mind with them, but put your heart into them. They bring you daily and hourly into the very presence of God; his ways, his dealing with men, the infinite majesty of his Being form their very subject matter.

Put the shoes from off your feet in this holy presence!

6. Familiarity breeds contempt?

We are frequently told, though, that the great danger of the theological student lies precisely in his constant contact with divine things. The words which tell you of God's terrible majesty or of his glorious goodness may come to be mere words to you—Hebrew and Greek words, with etymologies, and inflections, and connections in sentences. The reasonings which establish to you the mysteries of his saving activities may come to be to you mere logical paradigms, with no further significance to you than their formal logical conclusiveness. God's stately stepplings in his redemptive processes may become to you a mere series of facts of history.

It is your great danger. But it is your great danger, only because it is your great privilege. Think of what your privilege is when your greatest danger is that the great things of religion may become common to you!

Other men, distracted by the dreadful drag of the world upon them and the awful rush of the world's work, find it hard to get time and opportunity so much as to pause and consider whether there be such things as God, and religion, and salvation from the sin that compasses them about and holds them captive.

The very atmosphere of your life is these things; you breathe them in at every pore; they surround you, encompass you, press in upon you from every side. It is all in danger of becoming common to you! God forgive you, you are in danger of becoming weary of God!

Let us turn the question—are you alive to what your privileges are? Are you making full use of them? Are you, by this constant contact with divine things, growing in holiness, becoming every day more and more men of God? You will never prosper in your religious life in the Theological College until your study becomes a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of

spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and your Saviour.

7. Importance of Religious Community

There are other religious exercises demanding your punctual attention which cannot be neglected. I refer particular now to the stated formal religious meetings of the College. No man can withdraw himself from the stated religious services of the community of which he is a member, without serious injury to his personal religious life.

The apostolic writer exhorts “to forsake not the assembling of ourselves together.” He has in mind the stated, formal assemblages of the community, and lays upon the hearts and consciences of his readers their duty to themselves. When he adds, “As the custom of some is,” he puts a lash into his command. We can see his lip curl as he says it. Who are these people, who are so vastly strong, so supremely holy, that they do not need the assistance of the common worship for themselves; and who, being so strong and holy, will not give their assistance to the common worship?

I trust you will not tell me that the stated religious exercises of the College are too numerous, or are wearying. That would only be to betray the low ebb of your own religious vitality.

Some students do not find themselves in a prayerful mood in the early hours of a winter morning; and are much too tired at the close of a hard day’s work to pray. They think the preaching of the Sabbath morning dull and uninteresting, and they do not find Christ at the Sabbath afternoon conference.

Such things I seem to have heard before; and yours will be an exceptional pastorate, if you do not hear something very like them, before you have been in a pastorate six months. Such things meet you every day on the street. They are the ordinary expression of the heart which is dulled or is dulling to the religious appeal.

Let me tell you straight-out that the preaching you find dull will no more seem dull to you if you faithfully obey the Master's precept: "Take heed how you hear." If there is no fire in the pulpit, it falls to you to kindle it in the pews. No man can fail to meet with God in the sanctuary if he takes God there with him.

How easy it is to roll the blame of our cold hearts over upon the shoulders of our religious leaders! It is refreshing to observe how Luther dealt with complaints of lack of attractiveness in his evangelical preachers. He had not sent them out to please people, he said, and their function was not to interest or to entertain. Their function was to teach the saving truth of God. If they did that, it was frivolous for people in danger of perishing for want of the truth to object to the vessel in which it was offered to them. "People cannot have their ministers exactly as they wish," he declares. "They should thank God for the pure word," and not demand St. Augustines and St. Ambroses to preach it to them. If a pastor pleases the Lord Jesus and is faithful to him—there is none so great and mighty but he ought to be pleased with him, too.

But why should we appeal to Luther? Have we not the example of our Lord Jesus Christ? Are we better than he? Surely, if ever there was one who might justly plead that the common worship of the community had nothing to offer him it was the Lord Jesus Christ.

But every Sabbath found him seated in his place among the worshiping people, and there was no act of stated worship which he felt himself entitled to discard. Returning from that great baptismal scene, from the searching trials of the wilderness, and from that first great tour in Galilee, he came back, as the record tells, "to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and"—so proceeds the amazing narrative—"he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue, on the Sabbath day." "As his custom was!" Jesus Christ made it his habitual practice to be

found in his place on the Sabbath day at the stated place of worship to which he belonged.

Is it necessary for me to exhort those who would be like Christ, to see to it that they are imitators of him in this?

8. Private religious exercises

But not even with the most assiduous use of the corporate expressions of the religious life of the community have you reached the foundation-stone of your piety. This is to be found in your closets, or rather in your hearts, in your private religious exercises, and in your intimate religious aspirations.

9. The Greatness of Your Calling

One hint I may give you, particularly adapted to you as students for the ministry: Keep always before your mind the greatness of your calling, that is to say, these two things: the immensity of the task before you, the infinitude of the resources at your disposal.

If we face the tremendous difficulty of the work before us, it will throw us back upon our knees; and if we worthily gauge the power of the gospel committed to us, that will keep us on our knees.

10. Seriousness of your Calling

In a time like this, careful observers of the life of our Colleges tell us that the most noticeable thing about it is a certain falling off from the intense seriousness of outlook by which students of theology were formerly characterized. So far as it is true, it is a great evil.

I would call you back to this seriousness of outlook, and bid you cultivate it, if you would be men of God now, and ministers who need not be ashamed hereafter.

Think of the greatness of the minister's calling; the greatness of the issues which hang on your

worthiness or your unworthiness for its high functions; and determine once for all that with God's help you will be worthy.

“God had but one Son,” says Thomas Goodwin, “and he made him a minister.” “None but he who made the world,” says John Newton, “can make a minister”—that is, a minister who is worthy.

11. Beware of being a Castaway

You can, of course, be a minister of a sort, and not be God-made. You can go through the motions of the work, and I shall not say that your work will be in vain—for God is good and who knows by what instruments he may work his will of good for men? What does Paul mean when he utters that terrible warning: “Lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway?” And there is an even more dreadful contingency. It is our Saviour himself who tells us that it is possible to compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when we have made him to make him twofold more a child of hell than we are ourselves.

Will we not be in awful peril of making our proselytes children of hell if we are not ourselves children of heaven? There is no mistake more terrible than to suppose that activity in Christian work can take the place of depth of Christian affections.

Activity, of course, is good. In the cause of the Lord we should run and not be weary—but not as a substitute for inner religious strength.

In the tendencies of our modern life, which all make for ceaseless activity, have a care that it does not become your case. Do you pray? How much do you pray? How much do you love to pray? What place in your life does the “still hour,” alone with God, take? I am sure that if you once get a true glimpse of what the ministry of the cross is, and of what you, as men preparing for this ministry, should be, you will pray, “Lord, who is sufficient for these things?” Your

heart will cry, “Lord, make me sufficient for these things.”

12. Angels Preparing to Sound the Trumpets

Old Cotton Mather wrote a great little book once, to serve as a guide to students for the ministry. The not very happy title which he gave it is *Manductio ad Ministerium*. But by a stroke of genius he added a sub-title which is more significant: *The angels preparing to sound the trumpets!*

That is what Cotton Mather calls you students for the ministry: the angels, preparing to sound the trumpets! Take the name to yourselves, and live up to it. Give your days and nights to living up to it! And then, perhaps, when you come to sound the trumpets the note will be pure and clear and strong, and perchance may pierce even to the grave and wake the dead.

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