

THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

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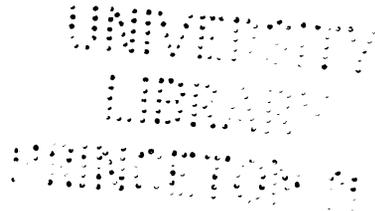
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OF

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Prayer

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Address

THE FUNCTION AND THE GLORY OF THE MINISTRY OF GRACE

THE REVEREND JOHN FLEMING CARSON, D.D., LL.D.
Pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn
**Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church
in the United States of America**

[327]

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FUNCTION AND THE GLORY OF THE
MINISTRY OF GRACE

ADDRESS

BY THE REVEREND JOHN FLEMING CARSON, D.D., LL.D.

Pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn
Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church
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IT is a distinct privilege and honor to have a part in such a signal celebration as that of the One Hundredth Anniversary of Princeton Theological Seminary and it is hard to resist the temptation to pause and pay tribute to this great institution and to the distinguished men, living or departed, who have made it great. But justice to the subject assigned compels me to hasten to its consideration, waiting only long enough to greet and congratulate the young men who this day complete their seminary training and stand on the threshold of their ministerial careers.

Young gentlemen, you stand in a noble succession and in a succession which has always commanded the confidence, respect and appreciation of men. You are entering upon a life-work incomparably more important than any other service to which men give themselves; a work that is related to interests more awful and august than those with which any other work is related, and a work whose achievements and results are more enduring and more wonderful than any of the other results and achievements of the labors of mankind.

The subject assigned to me is: "The Function and the Glory of the Ministry of Grace." In the statement of

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

this theme there is nothing that requires explanation, no hidden thought that waits to be released, no word that needs definition. There is one word in the phrasing of the theme that was more frequently upon the lips of the fathers than it is upon ours and this fact, as well as the vital place which the word occupies in the theme, justifies us in lingering for a little in the fellowship of that word. Grace is a word that the fathers understood, loved and accentuated. Grace is that faculty or force or element of being that comes unbidden and serves unrequested and unrequited. It is the love that pities the sinner, redeems from sin, and bends all its energies toward the complete and perfect recovery and restoration of man. It is absolutely free, a priceless gift that can neither be bought nor bartered nor sold. Let that radiant word come back in all its might and hold dominion in the soul, and then the church shall march with triumphant pæan to God's high goal and guerdon.

The use of this word "grace" in the subject defines the ministry in broad terms. The ministry of grace is a service that, however sustained, is unpurchased and unpurchasable by man and that does not stand in its successions and orders and institutions as a method of man's salvation, but as a medium through which the grace of God that bringeth salvation is revealed unto all men. Thus the term declares at once the independence and exaltation and the subserviency and lowliness of the ministry of grace.

1. This broad definition intimates that the ministry of grace is rooted in the very nature of God, and finds its object in the need of man. In this reach from the highest to the lowest, its supreme function is declared and its surpassing glory is enshrined. In the heart of God is

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

eternal love and in the heart of humanity is the undying need of that saving love. The function of the ministry of grace is to declare and to interpret the love of God to the heart of man. In fulfilling that distinct function the glory of the ministry of grace shines forth.

2. In the presence of such a service as this we are ready to accept the truth that the ministry of grace is an institution of God and that the ministers thereof are called of God. However men may debate and differ as to its vestments and ceremonials, as to the visible form in which it expresses itself, as to the outward ritual through which its inward spirit breaks upon the world, all will agree that in its essential spirit the ministry of grace has come down from heaven, and that it is here because God has sent it.

The evidences of the divine institution of the ministry of grace are manifold. The object for which it exists attests it. Its persistence through the ages—its refusal to be shelved by any studied neglect, or to be crowded out of place by any competing aspirants—confirms it. And the fact that the outworkings and issues of the ministry of grace are in God's keeping affirms its divine institution and sanction.

This is the vital fact that gives character and power and glory to the ministry of grace—the minister is the ambassador of God. His ministry is more than his message; his responsibility larger than his utterance. He is a God-called, a God-sent man. Conscious of his divine call and commission, his ministry rings with a note of authority that challenges the world. His voice is oracular. His message is a summons. He is bold, with a holy boldness, to declare the whole counsel of God, and confident, with a holy confidence, to speak God's truth. He

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

works in the spirit of Seneca's pilot, who said to Neptune:

"You may sink me, or you may save me,
But I will hold my rudder true."

He meets any opposition in the spirit of Curran, in his defence of Bond, who, when he heard the clatter of the arms of his threatening antagonist in court, said: "You may assassinate me, but you cannot intimidate me."

This is the ministry our age needs—a ministry whose manhood stands out in bold and flaming relief, whose service is impelled by a mighty imperative and constrained by an irresistible necessity and whose message does not stammer in fearsome uncertainty, is not stifled in mincing ambiguity, or hidden in any conventional finesse.

It ought ever to be an adequate inspiration to the minister to know that the work is God's and that God has called him into the fellowship of His Son under whose institution it is carried forward. The work committed to the ministry of grace is the same work that summoned the Son of God to earth. It is the work in which Paul gloried and for which he counted himself unworthy. It is the work that challenged the fiery energy of Tertullian, that commanded the scholarship of Athanasius, that girded the sturdy will of Luther, that kindled the fine fervor of St. Francis, saint of purest renown, that inspired the sublime genius of Calvin, that nerved the fearless strength of Knox, that evoked the bewitching eloquence of Jeremy Taylor, that directed the apostolic zeal of Wesley, that buttressed the giant power of Edwards—the work of reconciling men to God that they

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

may be saved from their sins, comforted in their sorrows and glorified in their death. This is the glory of the ministry of grace—it is a co-partnership with Christ and a fellowship of men of varying abilities through whose transparent souls the radiance of heaven has broken over earth.

3. This ministry of grace, ordained by God, is authenticated by God's people. While certain believers were assembled together, an unseen voice was heard saying: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." That was the divine call and the divine authorization. But not immediately did the men thus called go forth as fully and sufficiently authorized and empowered. There is in the incident another factor that may not be arbitrarily left out. After the unseen voice had spoken and after the assembled disciples had fasted and prayed "and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed." We may put too much emphasis on this laying on of the hands, or on it we may put too little; but the fact stands out that the inward call was ratified by the outward ordinance, the spiritual mission was confirmed by the tactual commission, the divine empowerment was certified by the human authentication. The gifts and powers of the Holy Ghost are not tied to the agencies ordained for their transmission. The Spirit worketh when and where and how He pleases. But still the fact remains that there is a way which is of God's appointment—a ministry which He first commissioned and which they whom He first commissioned passed on to others. Call this apostolic succession if you please, ridicule its pretensions and deride its efficiency, but you cannot dismiss from human history the fact that

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

the ministry of grace is not only an ordinance of divine appointment, but also of church authentication. Christ did not leave His fellowship and truth in the world unorganized and disembodied; He built His church and, through His church, He sends forth ambassadors. This distinguishes the ministry of grace from every other vocation—it has back of it the authority of the Church of Christ.

4. The ministry of grace, ordained by God and authenticated by the church, is in vital and permanent relation to the moral order of the world and to the unfolding history of humanity. The claim of its divine institution can be substantiated only by the eternal necessity and the essential rationality of the ministry of grace. In the counsels of God are woven the essential and eternal needs of human nature and of human history. It cannot be assumed that the divine seal rests upon any commission that does not convey a message that every man needs to hear, and that cannot grow obsolete with any conceivable civilization. The herald of God's counsels will be inspired with an unusual and sustained confidence when he speaks to his fellows under the profound conviction that what he has to say, the whole world, from prince to pauper, needs to hear and heed.

5. The ministry of grace, charged with a message to all men, is commissioned to the evangelization of the world and to the establishing of believers in the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. For the fulfilment of this twofold function the ministry of grace has an evangelistic and a teaching mission. The preacher is a herald, the substance of his message is the proclamation of the free forgiveness of sins and the heritage of eternal life through the mediation of Jesus Christ. The passion

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

of the ministry of grace is to save men from their sins, and, by the sweet and holy, the winsome and wooing note of divine persuasion, to lead to Christ. The final reality of the religious life is a man's personal relation and allegiance to his God. After much talking about "the enthusiasm of humanity", "the service of man", "social ministry", and other freezing abstractions, we must come back to the Master's love of men. "Jesus loved Mary, and Martha and Lazarus". "Who loved me and gave himself for me". "That is the superlative wonder in the altogether wonderful evangel of grace—the divine love can concentrate on everybody, as though each one were everybody, and there was only one child in the Father's house." This marvel of grace is the substance of the evangel that is committed to the ministry of grace.

The ministry of grace has a teaching mission and its message not only voices the evangelistic appeal of the Gospels, but also moves in the deep, broad grooves of the Pauline Epistles. In fulfilling its teaching function the ministry of grace does not come into competition with any other teaching agency. Its wide, splendid province is the revealing and the interpretation of the eternal verities. It may be of service to art, literature and philanthropy, but its concern is with the message from the very heart of the eternal to the souls of sinful men. Its music is set, not to the keynote of moral philosophy, or material rewards, or esthetic beauty, but to the exceeding abundance of the grace of God, which has in store for the human soul a kingdom which eye hath not seen.

As a teacher the minister is a specialist. He deals with men, it is true, on every side of their nature—physical, intellectual, spiritual; and with every department of

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

their living—domestic, social, commercial, civic—but always and everywhere he deals with them from the religious point of view. He is not a teacher of science or of philosophy; he is not an instructor in domestic science, or in political economy; he is not a leader in social functions or commercial enterprises—he is a teacher of religion. Therefore, his specialty is theology.

It is not uncommon to hear that theology is a declining science, that its majesty is waning like the splendor of some dying star, and that its voice of power is growing faint as the murmur of some distant sea. We are told that men are weary of theology and that the church is in revolt against it. There never was a more preposterous or perverse delusion. Theology is the abiding interest of men. It is the theologian who is listened to whether he speaks in the literature of history, imagination, poetry, science, or religion. So long as men believe in God, so long will they fashion for themselves a theology of some sort. The preacher announces himself as a teacher of God, and men demand of him, and have a right to demand, that his teaching concerning God and man's relation to God shall be definite, clear and exact. Men do not ask from the minister a final statement of truth, for they know that no statement of truth can be final, but they ask for something that shall be sufficiently near the eternal fact for which it stands to serve them. Men resent dogmatism. They welcome theology, a clear, scientific setting forth, not in technical phrase, but in orderly array and system of the great truths of revelation.

The ministry of grace is ordained to inspire men to noble aspirations, lofty living and consecrated service. Its aim is to relieve the fag and strain and stress of life;

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

to keep faith serene and strong; to hold before men the true values of life; to cause hope and courage to sing in every heart; to make men feel how near the heavens are to earth; to quicken the soul to divine endeavor and make the heart burn with a holy passion for the Lord Jesus—this is the high and holy and enviable purpose and privilege of the ministry of grace.

The ministry of grace has a prophetic function. It is successor not to the priestly order of the Old Testament, but to the prophetic office. The prophet was the most notable figure in ancient Israel. When he was in the ascendant, the nation rose to its best; but when he was ignored, silenced, or banished, the people deteriorated and the nation declined. The prophet was the man that saw and said. The chief characteristic of the prophet is that he sees God, sees Him in the light of all the ages, and sees Him in the life of his own day and declares and interprets His truth to his day. The function of the ministry of grace is to tell forth great truths, dominant principles, and so point out the broad highways along which all men and all their affairs move to their inevitable destiny.

All these several phases of the ministry of grace—its evangelistic, its teaching, its inspiring and its prophetic function—unite in realizing its supreme end, the setting forth of the tremendous realism of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, its profound spiritual and moral necessity, and its design as an historical fact to produce a definite historical and spiritual result—the redemption of mankind. Not simply the salvation of men, but a new-born humanity, and through that a reconstructed society, a redeemed race of mortal men and women on this earth. This is the Kingdom of God, which the prophets foretold

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

and for which the apostles longed and labored. This Kingdom is the revelation, the keynote of all the dispensations. For its establishment the ministry of grace is to labor by preparing the way for the coming of the King and, in its establishment by the enthronement of the King, the ministry of grace will realize its eternal coronation.

6. The ministry of grace is equipped with the Word of God and endowed by the Spirit of God for the fulfilment of its divine mission. As an ambassador of God the minister does not make his message. He delivers the message that has been entrusted to him. He is not called to proclaim his own ideas or speculations, but to preach God's Word; not his own guesses at a thousand things, but God's revelation of truth and righteousness. The preacher has not a roving commission to wander up and down the universe of knowledge. As Christ's ambassador he must take the latitude from his Master; and Christ concerned Himself with the relations of the human soul to God, and all which is contained in that fellowship. The minister will never exhaust that revelation. He will never feel equal to the high and holy duty of declaring it, but he will declare it and he will declare it with the tone of confidence and certainty, for it is God's eternal truth. Criticism and investigation have not changed the truth of God. The intellectual play on the surface has not touched the deep verities. The truth is a fixed quantity, and is a firm path through the highway of the ages. The great guiding lines have not become confused by the march of time; they are as true and significant today as on the day when they were first penned and they have as clear and confident a message for today. Men tell us that the need of the hour is to

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

adjust truth to modern conditions. The need is that we adjust modern conditions to truth. I do not see how truth can be adjusted to conditions, but I do see how conditions can and should be adjusted to truth. You cannot adjust the polar star to the ship's compass, but you can set the ship's compass by the polar star.

In unfolding the Word of God the ministry of grace depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, knowing full well that He alone can disclose and interpret what He has first inspired. Put emphasis upon the personality, upon the intellectual equipment, upon the all round ability of the preacher, but ever remember that the power that melts men's wills into God's will is not in human genius, but in God's grace. This divine grace is not necessarily independent of human genius. On the contrary it ordinarily uses that genius as the channel of its operation. Hence the insistent and imperious demand for a ministry that is equipped, efficient, enlightened and enlightening. No man with any power of vision can be blind to this demand, and no man with any integrity of mind can ignore it. The rock-bottom need of the pulpit is baptized intellect. This is the secret of the pulpit's mastery over men and the strength of its position in society. From Paul to Jonathan Edwards, from Jonathan Edwards to Archibald Alexander, from Archibald Alexander to Charles Hodge, from Charles Hodge to men whose presence on this occasion alone prohibits the mention of their names, the pathway to the throne of pulpit power is lined with the monuments of mountain-minded men. There was spiritual endowment, but along with it there was a natural endowment that would have given its possessor commanding influence anywhere among men. Behind the voices that have

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF

stirred the world, the messages that have thrilled and enkindled human hearts, were thinking, reasoning men, speaking out of the large and the rich manhood in themselves to the manhood of other men. But they were sanctified, set apart men, men baptized with the Holy Ghost. Those last words, "baptized with the Holy Ghost," let us into the presence of that unique distinction that forever differentiates the endowment of the ministers of Christ from any mere natural endowment. It is endued endowment. It is the permeation of all natural qualities and forces with a divine presence and their control by a divine power. That which gives the ministry of grace its authority and its power, either to evangelize or to teach, is not the native gifts of its ministers, however great they may be, but the enduement of the life with the majesty and glory and grace of the Holy Ghost.