

THE DUTY
OF DEDICATING OUR SONS TO GOD,
FOR THE GOSPEL MINISTRY.BY THE REV. M. W. JACOBUS, D. D.

THEME—“ *That Christian parents be exhorted to give their sons to God with a view of their being trained by the Spirit, and by the Church, to the work of the Gospel Ministry.*”

There are certain cardinal truths affecting most deeply the life of the Christian church, which, by reason of long neglect, have died out from the common recognition, and need at intervals to be re-argued and re-established. Such a truth, we take it, is this duty of Christian parents to dedicate their sons to God, with a view to the Gospel ministry. Like most other great practical truths, it has had its counterfeit in systems of formalism; and the false practice has prevailed instead of the genuine, until the very abuse has thrown discredit upon the true doctrine. So that even now, at the suggestion of so important a topic, we think it needful to vindicate it against any suspicion of fellowship with that absurd system of designating a particular son of the family to the ministry, just as another is set apart to the army or navy.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the *counterfeit* points to the *true*; and it is our business to inquire what is *the truth*, in doctrine and practice, which is disguised under this empty formalism.

Under the old economy, the original ordinance required the *first born son* to be set apart for the priesthood, or rather this sacerdotal office was one of the birthright privileges. The principles underlying this arrangement, were,

1. That God's service at the altar was the highest and best;

2. That this sacred office required the first and best of the offspring;

3. That they who had been pre-eminently spared—as *their first born* had been in the Egyptian scourge—should be solemnly dedicated to God as his of double right; while thus also they should point to him who is the great *First Born* among many brethren. Reasoning from all analogy, these principles are of full force under the Christian dispensation; and are even expected to prevail more specially, as the shadow merges into the substance. Do Christian parents doubt that God's service at the altar is still the highest and the best? Or is this indeed the lurking *fallacy*, the worm at the root of our ministerial supplies, that fathers and mothers in the Church seek worldly avocations for their sons, as more lucrative, or more honourable? Have they, indeed, ceased to regard the sacred office as the birthright privilege of their Samuels, and Johns, and Timothys, which it were profane to part with for a mess of pottage?

And will it be for one moment disputed by Christian parents that this service of God in the sacred office, calls for the first and best of their offspring? And if this be so, then does it not in effect set up the first claim to each one of those who, as sons, are able to serve Him in the ministry? Or, for which of their sons shall they make out an exemption on the ground of inferiority? Does not this principle, so essentially belonging to both economies, of consecrating to God's altar the best of its kind, cut off the plea that any son is too talented, or too promising, or too useful in a worldly point of view, to be given up to this religious work?

And further ; as “ the first born ” were claimed, as a class, for the ancient ministry because these, as a class, had been savingly distinguished from Egypt’s first born, who were swept off by the destroying angel, does not God’s *effectual call* to any of our sons, so far set a mark upon them as being claimed for his service in the New Testament priesthood ? Let it not be answered that under the New Testament the priesthood is only the common Christian vocation, inasmuch as every believer under this economy is ordained to be a priest ; for the same argument, if pressed, would abolish the sacred office altogether, and merge the christian ministry into the common christian discipleship. If, then, we see our sons hopefully converted to God, does not this so far indicate that He who separated them from their birth, would put them into the ministry ? Is there any provision made under the New Testament, for their redemption with money, from so blessed and privileged a service ? If so, where is *the family of Aaron*, upon whom, in their stead, the office can fall ? And if there be misconception here, may not the church be failing of her supplies, and the ministry of its reinforcements, just because this family resource is neglected, and there is none appointed in its stead ? Christian parents do rather ignore their own priesthood when they deny the duty of their sons, and God’s claim upon them as the *proper sons of Levi*. Should they not ask importunately for their new birth, as Hannah asked for Samuel, with the pledge, that if God would but convert them, they should be dedicated to his service in the gospel ministry ? “ For this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him. Therefore, also, I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.”—1 Sam. i. 27, 28. But it may be contended that we should rather dedicate our sons to God’s service in general, without any special reference to the work of the ministry ; that we ought rather to leave it to

his providence to indicate their function, lest we seem to dictate to God. But if it be conceded that the sacred office is *that* in which ordinarily God may be most eminently served; and if our dedication of sons to such service supposes always his effectual preparation of them for the work, and the inward call of his Spirit as a special personal requisite, and if also it implies a submission to the order of his providence as to the outward call, then surely there can be no danger here of trenching upon the divine prerogative.

But, consider 1. that *the pressing wants of the field* are such as to call for such a *system of recruits*. If the whole tribe of Levi was needed for the old temple service, and all the sons of Aaron for the priesthood, it is quite as necessary now that all the sons of christian parents be separated for this work, if they can have the requisite qualification. And whence should the recruits be looked for more appropriately than from this very quarter? And is not this always the fair presumption in the case, that the ministry will be taken from families of the covenant? And if christian parents have any right to presume upon their children being owned as the Lord's, have they not a corresponding obligation to devote them as the Lord's, to his most eminent service in the ministry? Is not the presumption then always on this side, that while *this immense want continues*, if our sons are owned by God as his children, through his converting grace, they should be consecrated to his highest service, to be his gospel *ministers if he so please*? And how can christian parents respond to the divine command, and with an eye upon the whitened harvest, pray that the Lord would send forth labourers into his harvest, if, at the same time, they are not using their proper influence with God and with their sons, to put *those of their own household* into the harvest field? Who shall tell how many loud prayers in our church assemblies, for the reinforcement of the ministry, have been powerless, just because of this lurking self-de-

ception in many a parent's heart? Amidst all the crying demands of the foreign and domestic field, the sad deficiency of labourers, and the dismal prospect for any forthcoming supplies, worldly parents have rather sought for their sons the position of merchant princes than of ministers of Christ. And what wonder, that God *often as now*, rebukes such worldliness, and shows them that this, their birth-right, has been profanely parted with for a mess of pottage? May we not presume then, that while such immense destitutions in the harvest field *continue*—while the Master is so urgently calling for men—while the church is trembling before the gates of hell, just for lack of some such systematic reinforcement of her troops, the sons of the church are demanded for the ministry, and christian parents ought so to calculate, and to train them with this in view?

Consider, 2, *the positive power in the household of such parental dedication*. Can it be doubted that our sons, thus set apart, and instructed, and prayed for, with a view to such a holy service, would be placed at every advantage for their early conversion to God? What a train of pious influences would needs go forth from such a parental aim in the daily education! What fervency in prayer would come from such a prospect and hope of seeing these sons ministering in holy things! What lofty christian conversation and example would naturally ensue! And have we not reason to believe that the prayers which look toward such a dedication would be heard, and that thus our sons would be converted much more commonly than at present? Would it not oftener occur, as with Hannah, that the *vow* accompanying the *petition* would draw down a gracious answer from a covenant God? But we have staggered at this point! We have hesitated to say, "*If thou wilt give unto thy servant this son, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life;*" and therefore often our sons have grown up unconverted for lack of this very parental dedication.

OBSERVE: We do not contend that all our sons should be put into the ministry, whether converted or not. Nor even that all of them who are hopefully the Lord's should be, of course and at any rate, absolutely designated to that office. God must call them as he called Aaron. But we urge that, on our part, we should hold them as devoted to the Lord for *this work*, as that to which *we may fairly hope that God will call them*; and that, with this view, we should train them, and pray for them, and lead their minds, and direct their course, looking to his providence and his Spirit to second our efforts and open the way. This would contemplate quite a different course of conduct from that which most commonly obtains in our households, with respect to our sons. It would point to the highest aims for their usefulness and their devotedness, and it would call for an exalted christian culture, such as a mere passive dedication could never reach. We would not, by any means, maintain any such *presumption* as would dispense with a particular, personal *call*, in any case. But we believe that this call more often comes to our converted sons than is commonly admitted. And we believe that among *them* at least, the misapprehension is much more often *against* the cal' than *for* it, and keeps out of the ministry more of these who are *called*, than it brings into the ministry of those who are not called.

But this view of the subject has not been overlooked by the General Assembly of our church. In 1840, we find them using such language as this: "We suggest to christian parents the important duty of dedicating their children to God, and especially of pleading continually with the Most High, in subordination to his holy will, to sanctify their sons and prepare them for the sacred ministry. Our feelings (they add) have been deeply enlisted in this subject by the statements laid before us from the Board of Education, which show that the number of our candidates for the ministry is decreasing. We call upon all the pious parents

in our communion to consider this affecting circumstance. We have hundreds of vacant churches in our connection. Several millions of the population of the Union are believed to be destitute of the stated means of grace; the heathen world spread out before us in one vast scene of crime, and cruelty, and woe, appeals to us with an unyielding and soul-piercing importunity, to send them relief. And yet our candidates for the ministry are fewer now than they have been for some years. Will you not lay this to heart? Will you not bring your sons and consecrate them anew to your covenant God? Will you not give over seeking for them the transitory honours and riches of this world, and pray the Lord of the harvest, if it seem good in his sight, to anoint them with his Spirit, and send them forth into his harvest which is perishing for lack of labourers?"—*Minutes* 1840, p. 310.

We would only urge, in conclusion, the striking FACTS which so attest the importance and value of such parental dedication. The celebrated *John Newton* testifies: "I have been told, that from my birth my pious mother had, in her mind, devoted me to the ministry; and that, had she lived until I was of a proper age, I was to have been sent to St. Andrews, in Scotland, to be educated. But the Lord had appointed otherwise. She died before I was seven years of age." Yet, mark the training of which he testifies: "When I was four years old, I could repeat the answers to the questions in the Shorter Catechism, with the proofs, and all Dr. Watts's smaller catechisms, with his children's hymns." This was the power of that parental dedication in such daily training, not only for the ministry, but for heaven. How the hand of a covenant God wrought with him through all his after impieties, and with all the persistency of a divine ordination, checked, disciplined, and reclaimed him, till he became an able and faithful minister of the New Testament, according to that pious mother's prayer, is a notable chapter in the annals of the church.

Of *Rev. John Belfrage*, his biographers remark that his christian mother laboured to prepare him for the sacred office, to form pious sentiments in his mind, and to cherish devout feelings in his heart. She marked, with pleasure, her son's early inclination for the ministry, which had been awakened by means of her own early religious influences upon him. Accordingly, when, at a suitable age, he was sent to the College of Edinburgh, it pleased God to work in him the graces of a christian character, and he became a devoted and faithful minister of Christ, after his pious mother had been laid in the dust.

Dr. Claudius Buchanan was, from his childhood, devoted by his parents to the ministry. He was, however, a reckless youth, and pursued a course of wandering through several years, until, at length, the God of *Newton* brought him to attend on the ministry of that reclaimed wanderer, and he was led to Christ. It was on hearing a sermon from the passage in *Isaiah*: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings," that all his early parental dedication to the ministry forced itself upon his heart. He became, at length, a preacher of the gospel in England, and afterwards filled an important post in India, as a herald of the Cross.

It is recorded, also, of the celebrated *Philip Henry*, that his godly mother devoted him, in his tender years, to the service of God in the work of the ministry; and though she died before he was fourteen years of age, he always spoke of her as being to him, what *Timothy's* mother and grandmother were to *him*—acquainting him with the Scriptures from his childhood. She prayed with him daily; catechized him, and thus laid the foundation for his future usefulness in the great and holy work to which she had devoted him.

Of the *Rev. John Bailey*, who was a faithful minister of the gospel in Ireland, and in New England, it is recorded that his godly mother dedicated him to the service of God

in the gospel ministry, from his earliest moments. He was accordingly trained in a way befitting such a sacred aim, and from being reared like Timothy, he became, like him, an eminent minister of the New Testament.

We add the name of the celebrated *President Davies*. His mother, says his biographer, took example from the mother of the prophet Samuel, and vowed a vow unto the Lord, that if he would indeed give her a man-child, she would devote him to his service all the days of his life. Hence he was called Samuel. At twelve years of age, it is remarked that he was more ardent in his supplications for being introduced into the gospel ministry, than for any other thing. "The event proved," says President Finley, in his sermon on his death, "that God accepted the consecrated boy—took him under his special care—furnished him for, and employed him in, the service of his church—prospered his labours with remarkable success, and not only blessed him, but made him a blessing." To the same effect, is the case of *Rev. Dr. Mc Millan*, as narrated in "The History of Jefferson College," by *Rev. Joseph Smith, D. D.*

"In a manuscript of Dr. Mc Millan, found among his papers, there is the following statement which he makes of his history :

" 'Before my birth my parents had some children, I think two sons, who died while they were young. My father told me that he had promised to God that if he would give him another son, he would call his name John, and devote him to his service in the ministry of the gospel. Accordingly, as soon as I had acquired a sufficient degree of English literature, I was sent to the grammar school, &c. While there the Lord poured out his Spirit upon the students. I went to College on a day which had been set apart by a number of the students to be observed as a day of fasting and prayer. While the others were at dinner, I retired into my study, and while trying to pray, I got some discoveries of divine

things which I had never had before. I felt it now easy to submit to the gospel plan of salvation, &c. I had great difficulties in my own mind about undertaking the work of the gospel ministry. However, I at last came to this determination, to leave the matter wholly with God: if he opened the way, I would go on—if he shut it, I would be satisfied; *and I think if ever I knew what it was to have no will of my own about any matter, it was about this.*”

God has not left himself without witness. His faithfulness to his household covenant, and to his New Testament Church, has been signally manifested in a long line of ministers, parentally dedicated to him in this holy work. From Samuel, and those that follow after, a great cloud of witness-bearers have testified of these things. Many ministers now living could testify to the same effect, of such early parental dedication in their case. It has always pleased God to propagate his church by means of the descendants of a pious ancestry. He has transmitted his gospel ministry by this means. The sanctity of the domestic relation, and the power of parental influence and prayer, have been employed by him for so momentous a result as the recruiting of labourers for the harvest field of the world. And by all the necessities of his church, and of perishing millions in all lands, he calls upon christian parents to lay their sons at the foot of his altar, and to crave for them, as their high christian birth-right, the distinguished honour of serving him in the ministry of reconciliation. Where are our sons who have attained to years of maturity, or who are fitting for their stations in life? Have we honestly devoted them to the sacred ministry, and then, in good faith, pleaded with God to train them up for so high and holy a calling, if it were his will? Or have we borne no testimony in the household, and used no influence with God toward this result? Might it not be expected that the christian ministry would be recruited from our families? Does not God's service need them?

Are not the churches calling for men? Are we not now to labour and pray that the promise may soon be fulfilled, as the glory of the latter days, that our sons and our daughters shall prophesy, and that our young men shall see visions, as well as our old men dream dreams; and that, "*in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning, the church shall have THE DEW OF HER YOUNG MEN?*" Ps. cx. 3.

After the reading of this paper before the Synod of Pittsburgh, one of the most experienced among the pastors rose, and, with much emotion, made the following statement, illustrating the influence of parents in the training of their sons for the ministry:

"I once knew a young man of fine talents, whom I tenderly loved. He started in his preparatory course for the ministry. His father was a praying man, and his mother devotedly pious. The mother would have made any sacrifice; but the father could not bear the idea of spending so much money, as well as losing the time of his son. After a while the young man became disheartened, and gave up his studies, with the hope that he could make money and educate many poor young men to take his place. He did get wealthy and was tolerably liberal, but a sad mistake was made. One of the brightest young men I ever knew, was stopped in his course by the continued opposition of his brother. Once a father said to me, I have educated my son to be useful to me in my profession; and just when he has begun to be useful, he has abandoned me, and chosen the life of a *beggar*. That father had long been a professor of religion, and a trustee of the church. Even the mother regretted her son's course. She had pictured to herself a son, talented, wealthy, &c., and now, she said, he would be *nothing but a minister!*"

THE MOTHER'S REWARD.

I SAW a little smiling boy stand by the side of his mother, and heard him repeat from her lips one of the sweet songs of Zion. I saw him kneel at her feet, and pray that Jesus would bless his dear parents—the world of mankind, and keep him from temptation. In a little time I saw him with the books of the classics under his arm, walking alone, busied in deep thought. I went into a Sabbath-school, and heard him saying to a little group that surrounded him, “Suffer little children to come unto me.” Long after, I went into the sanctuary, and heard him reasoning of “righteousness, and temperance, and judgment to come.” I looked, and saw that same mother, at whose feet he had knelt, and from whose lips he had learned to lisp the name Immanuel. Her hair was whitened with the frosts of winter, and on her cheek was many a furrow; but meekness sat on her brow, and heaven beamed in her dim eye glistening with a tear; and I thought I saw in that tear the moving of a mother’s heart while she reverted to days gone by, when this Boanerges was first waking into life, hanging on her lips, listening to the voice of instruction, and inquiring, in child-like simplicity, the way to be good; and I said: This is the rich harvest of a mother’s toil; these are the goodly sheaves of the precious seed which probably was sown in weeping; and your gray hairs shall not be “brought down with sorrow to the grave,” but in the bower of rest you shall look down on him who “will arise and call you blessed,” and finally greet you where hope is swallowed up in fruition, and prayer in praise.