

# THE PRESENT TASK OF THE MINISTRY

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BY  
PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT WILSON, D.D.



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AN ADDRESS

AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE

Seventy-fifth Anniversary

OF

HARTFORD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BY

PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON, LL.D.

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## THE PRESENT TASK OF THE MINISTRY.

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Ladies and Gentlemen: I feel that there is a touch of temerity in an outsider's coming to estimate the task of the ministry, and yet I suppose that every profession is best estimated from the outside. There is a degree of self-consciousness on the part of those who practice it which prevents their proper estimation of their own service. There is among every conscientious party of men, perhaps, also, an exaggerated sense of short-coming and of failure, and therefore those who stand outside of the profession see it more in the mass, can estimate more the net results, overlooking the little discouragements and the details which are seen so clearly by those who are inside the daily life. I had thought that the theme which has just been announced would be an appropriate theme for an occasion like this, because it is natural that a great institution, upon every anniversary of its beginning, should make some sort of estimate of what it is that it has done, not only, but of what it intends to do, what its spirit is, and what its purpose must continue to be.

I suppose that the graduating class today must feel that they are in some sense the mature fruitage of this institution and that it is particularly incumbent upon them to know what they would be about, to know what they would represent, to know what they would try to undertake and attempt in this day, this interesting generation of ours.

I do not envy the young minister who sets out upon his task in the present age, because I know of no more difficult, no

more delicate, no more tremendous undertaking than his. It is an undertaking to daunt any man who depended upon his own strength to accomplish it. Unless a man goes, in this age, on this errand with the conscious support of the spirit of God, I do not see how he can have the audacity to go out at all. We live in an age when a particular thing cries out to be done which the minister must do, and there is no one else who can do it. A very interesting situation has arisen, intellectually, in our own day. There was a time, not many years ago, marked by an entirely different intellectual atmosphere. There was a time, which we can all remember, when men of science were content, were actually content, with a certain materialistic interpretation of the universe. Their antagonistic position with regard to spiritual matters was not a defiant position. It was a position of self-assurance and of self-content. They did not look into such matters, because they were convinced that it was vain to look into them, that there was nothing that would come of their examination of the secret motives, of the secret springs of action among men, of the secret source of life in the world itself. But that time has gone by. Even men of science now feel that the explanation which they give of the universe is so partial an explanation, so incomplete an explanation, that for the benefit of their own thought—quite aside from the benefit of their own souls—it is necessary that something should be added to it. They know that there is a spiritual segment in the complete circle of knowledge which they cannot supply and which must be supplied if the whole circle is not to show its imperfection and incompleteness.

In connection with the administration of universities in our day there is an exceedingly interesting situation in the field of science. It used to be possible to draw sharp lines of division between the several fields of science. But it is no longer possible to do that. The science of physics can no longer establish

a scientific frontier as against the science<sup>1</sup> of mathematics. The science of physics, on the other side, cannot determine with definiteness where its jurisdiction ends and the jurisdiction of chemistry begins. Chemistry, on its further borders, cannot clearly discriminate between its field and the field of organic biology. Biology knows that it shades off into that great historical biology that lies in the field of paleontology, recorded in the buried records of what the earth's surface contains. And all of these sciences are aware that, linked as they thus are together, they must have some common principle and explanation; that we cannot stop at any frontier because there is no frontier; that the domain of knowledge, like the globe itself, is round and there is no stopping place; that what we have to do is to complete, at whatever cost, the map of knowledge, to press onward into the field where lie the unknown things both of physical knowledge and of spiritual knowledge.

In other words, we are in the presence of the absolute necessity of a spiritual coördination of the masses of knowledge which we have piled up and which we have partially explained, and the whole world waits for that vast task of intellectual mediation to be performed. Who shall mediate between our spirits and our knowledge? Who shall show our souls the tracks of life? Who shall be our guides, to tell us how we shall thread this intricate plan of the universe and connect ourselves with the purpose for which it is made?

I do not know who is to tell us if not the minister. I do not know in whom these various bits of knowledge should center and bear fruit if not in him. The world offers this leadership, this intellectual mediation, to the minister of the gospel. It is his if he be man enough to attempt it; man enough in his knowledge, man enough in the audacity and confidence of his spirit, man enough in the connections he has made with the eternal and everlasting forces which he knows to reside in the human spirit.

I believe that we have erroneously conceived the field of the Christian Church in our age. If my observation does not mislead me, the Christian Church nowadays is tempted to think of itself as chiefly a philanthropic institution, chiefly an institution which shall supply the spiritual impulse which is necessary for carrying on those great enterprises which relieve the distress, distress of body and distress of mind, which so disturbs the world and so excites our pity, among those men particularly who have not had the advantages of fortune or of economic opportunity. And yet I believe that this is only a very small part of the business of the Church. The business of the Church is not to pity men. The business of the Church is not to rescue them from their suffering by the mere means of material relief, or even by the means of spiritual reassurance. The Church cannot afford to pity men, because it knows that men, if they would but take it, have the richest and completest inheritance that it is possible to conceive, and that, rather than being deserving of pity, they are to be challenged to assert in themselves those things which will make them independent of pity. No man who has recovered the integrity of his soul is any longer the object of pity, and it is to enable him to recover that lost integrity that the Christian Church is organized. To my thinking, the Christian Church stands at the center not only of philanthropy but at the center of education, at the center of science, at the center of philosophy, at the center of politics; in short, at the center of sentient and thinking life. And the business of the Christian Church, of the Christian minister, is to show the spiritual relations of men to the great world processes, whether they be physical or spiritual. It is nothing less than to show the plan of life and men's relation to the plan of life.

I wonder if any of you fully realize how hungry men's minds are for a complete and satisfactory explanation of life? I heard a very pathetic story told the other day about a poor woman,

a simple, uneducated woman, in one of our cities, who had, by some accident, got hold of one of Darwin's books—I don't know whether it was the *Origin of Species* or not—and who had found, even to her unlettered mind, a great revelation in the book, a revelation of the processes of physical life and of the plan of physical existence. She told a friend that it had taken out of her—in her expression—"all the kick there was in her." She said: "I don't find anything in the preaching that I hear. It listens good, but it is so soft. It doesn't seem to give me anything to chew on. It doesn't enable me to understand what happens to me every day any better than I understood it before. It doesn't even put bread in my mouth or in my children's mouths. But I read that book and I saw that there was something doing. I saw that there was something going on of which I was a little part, and it has taken all the kick out of me."

I believe that her experience is typical of the modern intellectual situation. We are infinitely restless because we are not aware of the plan. Just as soon as we are aware of the plan and see that there is "something doing," something definite, something to which we are related, even if by mere inexorable necessity, we at least know that it is futile to "kick," that it is inevitable that the processes of the gods should be ground out, and that, therefore, the whole operation of life is something to which we may properly relate ourselves if we choose, but must relate ourselves in some fashion whether we will or not. How arid, how naked, how unsatisfying a thing, merely to know that it is an inexorable process to which we must submit! How necessary for our salvation that our dislocated souls should be relocated in the plan! And who shall relocate them, who shall save us by enabling us to find ourselves, if not the minister of the gospel?

Shall he stand up in his place of teaching and talk as if there were antagonism between science and religion? If he does, he is taking religion out of the modern mind, for religion cannot remain there if it is antagonistic with science. Religion is the explanation of science and of life, that lost segment of the circle of which I was speaking just now. Think of the knowledge, therefore, with which the minister must equip himself! Not at the outset, for that is impossible, but as he grows in power and in his own understanding of the plan of the world. Think what it is that he must do for men!

In the first place, it seems to me that he must interpret the plan, not only in terms which will satisfy men of science and the deeper students of theology, but also in terms and from a point of view that will aid the man in the street who can see only a little part of the plan. The minister must seek out for him such part of the plan as can be made visible to his obstructed eye, and lead him on from this little door where he enters the plan to that larger comprehension to which every door which enters the plan at all must ultimately lead. He must show men that there is a plan and he must show that plan to them ultimately in its completeness.

In that way he must discover for men their spirits. I sometimes think that men in our age are either losing their spirits or thinking that they have lost them. It is a very confusing age for a man of conscience. In the modern organization of economic society; for example, no man is a complete whole, every man is a fraction. No man is an integer. His conscience has to reckon out for itself what part the fraction plays in the whole and what possibility of independent action there is for the fraction. The undetachable fraction lies imbedded in the mass and cannot be entirely discriminated from it, and men have allowed their consciences to run down because the mechanism in them seemed to be affected by great magnets outside, which

made it impossible for them to work independently. All their little individual compasses were disturbed by great masses — chiefly of gold, — in their neighborhood, and they have asked themselves how they could disengage their consciences and become independent instrumentalities in the sight of God. The task is so tremendous and so perplexing that many men have adjourned the effort and have decided that all they can do is to drift with the general movement of the mass. They are craving to have someone rediscover their spirits for them.

Not many men in my hearing profess scruples in respect of their business and occupation; not many men indulge their consciences, and they are a little ashamed of evidences of indulging their consciences. Ask the majority of men why they go to church and, if you get the same answer that I get, you will get an answer something like this: that it is decent to go to church; that it is expected of them to go to church; moreover that they have lived in that community, men and boys, a great many years, and their fathers and mothers went to the same churches before them; they like to maintain the moral traditions and the vague spiritual connections which go with the habit of attending church. Don't believe a word of it. It is a pure sham. Every man who is not absolutely dried up is kept alive by an inexhaustible well of sentiment. It is the fashion of our age to cover the well over with concrete so that you cannot even see or guess the gleam of the waters, but they are there, creeping up in the soil and maintaining all that produces living fruit.

What the minister has to do is to blast away these concrete covers and say to men "Here are the only sustaining waters of life, here is the rediscovery of your spirits." In that wise they must reveal God to men, reveal God to them in their own spirits, reveal God to them in thought and in action, reestablish the spiritual kingdom among us, by proclaiming in season and

out of season that there is no explanation for anything that is not first or last a spiritual explanation, and that man cannot live by bread alone, cannot live by scientific thought alone; that he is not only starving but that he knows that he is starving, and that digestion of this dry stuff that he takes into his mouth is not possible unless it be conveyed by the living water of the spirit.

I take that to be a very great and a very difficult task—a challenge to the best things that are in any man. I congratulate you, young gentlemen, that this is your high and difficult function in life. I beg you not to apologize for the Scripture to any man. I beg you not to explain it away in the presence of any audience, but to proclaim its sovereignty among men, the absolute necessity of the world to know these things if it would know itself. For it is a very significant matter, in my mind, that the gospel came into the world to save the world as well as to save individual souls. There is one sense in which I have never had very much interest in the task of saving individual souls by merely advising them to run to cover. It has never seemed to me that the isolation of the human soul, its preservation from contamination such as the Middle Ages attempted, or any modern substitute for that, was graced with any dignity at all. If men cannot lift their fellow-men in the process of saving themselves, I do not see that it is very important that they should save themselves, because they reduce Christianity by that means to the essence of selfishness, and anything that is touched with selfishness is very far removed from the spirit of Christianity. Christianity came into the world to save the world as well as to save individual men, and individual men can afford in conscience to be saved only as part of the process by which the world itself is regenerated. Do not go about, then, with the idea that you are picking out here and there a lost thing, but go about with the consciousness that you are setting afoot a

process which will lift the whole level of the world and of modern life.

Until you believe that, there is absolutely no use in your going into a pulpit, you will have to have musical entertainments in order to get an audience; and then I hope you will be distinctly aware that it is the music and not you that brought the people. But if you have something to say to these people that fills you as with a living fire, it will not be necessary to have any music or any cooking classes or any bowling alleys or any gymnastics in order to bring men to the source of the things for which they most long. If you feel this, you can preach in such seething syllables as to make them feel it; and unless you preach in that wise I advise you to go into some more honest occupation. This work in the modern world is assigned to you by invitation, and if you decline the invitation then you have shown that there was some mistake in the address on the envelope. It was not intended for you. It was intended for you only if when it meets your eye your spirit leaps to the challenge and accepts it, as those do who accept the obvious lesson of every impulse that is in them, the very dictate of their conscience.

And so, standing outside the ministry, longing to see it come to the relief of those of us who undertake the imperfect processes of education, longing to see the modern world given the privilege of witnessing a day when the human spirit shall come unto its own again, I congratulate you, I welcome you, and above all, I would challenge you to do this high thing in such wise as shall mark the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of this seminary as nothing else could mark it — by taking your part, at any rate, in giving to the world the vision of God which it was intended to exhibit.