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The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry

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(An essay on Gilbert Tennent's celebrated sermon)

On March 8, 1740, Gilbert Tennent, Presbyterian minister, delivered a sermon in the Presbyterian Church in Nottingham, Pennsylvania, titled "The Danger of An Unconverted Ministry." It caused a great uproar among the colonial churches. Yet I should like to show in this brief essay that Tennent's sermon was both correct and appropriate for his time, and it is still so for ours.

According to Joseph Tracy's history of the Great Awakening, one of the distinctive emphases of this movement was the doctrine of the new birth. Reformation theology had certainly included the doctrine of regeneration, but often it was taught in such a way that the hearers could not expect to know whether they had been born again. So orthodoxy in doctrine and outward respectability of life were generally accepted measures of piety for those who remained in the Protestant state churches of Europe, and from there these views came into some of the colonial churches. Men entered the ministry, in many cases, not knowing whether they themselves had a personal interest in Christ's saving work.

Itinerant evangelists like George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent preached often on the new birth and the need for a converted ministry. But in this sermon Tennent needlessly inflamed a volatile subject by some rash remarks. He clearly described the Pharisees of Jesus' day and then equated unconverted ministers to them, even though in Jesus' time not every religious teacher was a Pharisee. Nor was it necessary for Tennent to attribute Judas' greed to all unconverted ministers, for self sacrifice and virtue (outward) are not the sole possession of pious ministers. As Tennent inadvertently implied by quoting the Apostle Paul, it is no great thing if his [Satan's] ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Nevertheless, some of Tennent's words, though harsh, bear

some resemblance to those of our Lord Jesus. Note Tennent's words:

I fear that the abuse of this instance has bro't many Judases into the ministry, whose chief desire, like their great grandfather, is to finger the pence, and carry the bag. But let such hireling murderous hypocrites take care, that they don't feel the force of a halter in this world, and an aggravated damnation in the next.

Compare Tennent's words with Jesus' words: "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:6).

Further, some rashness of speech is typical of revival movements when emotions are stirred deeply. Inexperienced evangelists, seeking to sweep all before them, view any clerical opposition to their plans as opposition to God, and therefore proof of their unconverted state. On the other hand, truly pious ministers often oppose revivals of religion because they see in them departures from scriptural faith and order. Before they embrace every "new measure" of man they want to see a "thus saith the Lord."

The third section of Tennent's sermon reveals his reasonableness in argument. He states: "The ministry of natural men, is for the most part unprofitable, which is confirmed by a three-fold evidence, viz. of Scripture, reason and experience." As proof Tennent alludes to the Scripture characterization of the unconverted when he asks, "Is a blind man fit to be a guide in a very dangerous way? Is a dead man fit to bring others to life?" From reason he argues that an unconverted minister is like a man who would teach others to swim before he knew how himself, and would therefore drown in the effort. And Tennent noted from experience that:

. . . . sad security reigns in churches with unconverted ministers, with not a soul convinced that can be heard of, for many years together. . . . Isn't this the reason, why a work of conviction and conversion has been so rarely heard of, for a long time, in the churches, till of late, viz. that the bulk of her spiritual guides, were stone-blind and stone-dead?

Unconverted ministers, according to Tennent, had devastating effects on individuals and churches. On individuals because they promised life to the wicked, and comfort to sinners before they felt conviction, causing them to sleep in carnal security. Because they could not distinguish between law and gospel they led sinners to believe that their faithful observance of religious duties would recommend them to the favor of God, or entitle them to the promises of grace and salvation, thus relying on their own righteousness and not the merits of Christ.

Rather, for Tennent who believed in the sovereignty of God in salvation, and that faith comes by the hearing of the Word, he could only hold out that the possibility of conversion was available under the sound of the gospel. Thus, "Neither can other encouragement be justly given them, but this, that in the way of duty, there is a peradventure or probability of obtaining mercy." (This is the idea behind what Dr. John Gerstner has referred to as the Puritan doctrine of "seeking.")

Beyond their impact on individuals, unconverted ministers have devastating effects on churches. Because they don't relish the Calvinistic doctrines or doctrines of grace such as original sin and justification by faith alone, Tennent asked, "Is not the carnality of the ministry, one great cause of the general spread of Arminianism, Socinianism, Arianism and Deism, at this day through the world?"

And to what shall we attribute the steady decline of the once great denominations in our own land? We ought not look for sociological explanations, for in the same neighbor-

hoods where mainline churches are dying, other pietistic churches are thriving. Shall we look to the churches' ministry? Yes. I heard recently that 50 percent of United Methodist clergy leave the ministry within five years of leaving seminary. If true this would indicate a continuing urgent necessity that Tennent's message go forth into the churches and seminaries of our land. Our Lord's fearful warning still holds true: "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at the first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place" (Rev. 2:8).

An Addendum to the essay on Tennent's "Danger of an Unconverted Ministry":

Robert L. Ferm has left out some significant matter from his abridged version of Tennent's sermon for his book *Issues in American Protestantism: A Documentary History from the Puritans to the Present* (Peter Smith, 1983), when compared to the full version found in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller's *The Great Awakening—Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1967). He has left out material pertaining to parish boundaries, whether the laity could go outside their parish to hear the itinerant evangelists. If the clerical opponents of revival could not keep the itinerants from coming to their areas uninvited, at least they tried to ensure that their flocks would not go to hear them.

Ferm also left out the Scripture references in Tennent's sermon in key areas. Here are just a few:

Psalm 50:16: But unto the wicked, God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my Statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?

Tennent: Now, are not all unconverted men wicked men? Does not the Lord Jesus inform us, John 10:1, That he who

entreth not by the Door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other Way, the same is a thief and a robber?
Mt. 4:19: Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.
Tennent: See, our Lord will not make Men ministers 'till they follow him.

Tennent: And do not those Qualifications, necessary for Church officers, specified in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1:7-8 plainly suppose converting grace.

Tennent: Such as the Lord sends not, he himself assures us, shall not profit the people at all (Jer. 23:22).

Author

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So I am urging that there are certain truths which are absolutely essential to revival, and while these truths are denied, or are neglected, or ignored, we have no right to expect the blessing of revival. . . .

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

A revival of religion . . . consists in new spiritual life imparted to the dead and in new spiritual health imparted to the living.

James Buchanan
