

## **An Earnest Ministry the Need of the Times**

[John Angell James](#)

### **The Necessity of Divine Influence to Make the Ministry Efficient**

This treatise would be essentially defective in the estimation both of its author and its readers, if after so much has been advanced about **instrumentality**, nothing were to be said about the **agency** which is necessary to render it effectual for the accomplishment of its object. In all Divine operations, whether in the world of nature or of grace, God employs a chain of dependent means for the working out of his purposes and plans—but though dependent, they are appropriate. In acknowledging, as we must do, the adaptation of these means to the production of the intended result, we do homage to God's wisdom; while in confessing their dependence for efficiency upon his blessing, we do no less homage to his power and grace. There is no analogy which I can borrow from the world of nature that can satisfactorily illustrate the operation of Divine grace on the human mind. I know very well that second causes in the material universe depend for their efficiency upon Divine influence—but it is an influence of a totally different kind, and exerted altogether in a different matter from that of which I now write; and we are very little aided in our perceptions of the nature of the Spirit's operation upon the human mind, by anything we observe in the world of vegetable or animal life.

There are two aspects in which man is to be viewed in relation to the means employed for his salvation--he is to be considered as both a rational and a sinful creature, (or as a rational creature whose reason is under the dominion of sin), and consequently, whatever method be adopted for his salvation, he must be dealt with in both these views of his condition. His fallen state as a sinner has not bereft him of his reason, will, and responsibility. But his reason and will alone will never lift him out of his condition as a fallen sinner. He cannot be dealt with otherwise than as he is, and he must be treated as a rational creature, and not as a brute or a block. His intellect must be appealed to by argument, and his heart by motives. And it will be seen that in the means of grace, and especially in preaching, there is provision for this.

There is **truth** to be presented to the intellect, truth which represents the whole state of the case between God and the sinner, the nature and obligations of the moral law, the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the weight of the tremendous penalty of the violated precept; the wonderful love of God in the provision he has made for the salvation of the sinner, with the eternal results of misery or bliss which follow upon faith and unbelief respectively. In this, there is something in its nature adapted to engage the attention, and to interest the heart, of the sinner. It is not only the truth—but just the truth that suits his condition.

In addition to this, there is, in preaching, the adaptation of the **manner**, as well as the matter, to his circumstances, the tendency of the living voice, pastoral solicitude, and earnest elocution, to engage the intellect and impress the heart. It will follow of course that earnestness is a part of this well-adapted system of means, and the more earnest a man is, the more likely, so far as means go, is he to do good. For if it is the **matter** which God blesses to change the heart, it is also the **manner** which he blesses to fix the attention preparatory to this change—there is as obvious an adaptation in the latter as in the former. How is it, that there is greater efficiency usually attendant upon hearing the word, than there is upon reading it? Just because there is a greater adaptation to fix attention and to impress the heart; and by the same rule I argue there is more adaptation to do this in one man's manner than in that of another.

Hence we see that those preachers are most successful who we might expect to be so, independently of the Divine power. This does not disprove the necessity of a Divine influence—but only shows what order of instrumentality it is that the Divine Spirit usually employs, and consequently what instrumentality we should select. As God does not usually bless ignorance, dullness, obscurity, or feebleness--we should avoid them; for to look for great results from them, is to expect not only what God has not promised—but what he very rarely bestows. God deals with us as rational creatures, by presenting to us, and requiring us to understand and believe that truth, the reception of which into the heart changes the whole character and conduct.

But there is in the heart of man, not only an indifference to Divine truth—but an opposition to Divine truth. "The carnal mind is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." The heart so blinds the judgment that "the natural man discerns not the things of the Spirit of God, neither indeed can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Therefore, however the attention may be gained by the manner of a preacher, (and gained it must be in order to conversion,) yet the heart is still opposed to the truth; and hence the need of the Spirit's influence to subdue this resistance of the heart to the truth itself. Thus the truth and the Spirit concur in conversion—it is the sinner being brought to know and love the objects presented in the truth, therefore the truth must be presented to the intellect, in order that it may be known and loved. But it never will be so loved, however theoretically understood, until the Spirit takes away the disrelish for it, which is in the heart. Without the

truth, there is nothing to engage the attention and employ the intellect of man as a rational being; without the Spirit there is no right disposition of the heart, when the truth is so presented.

If a certain quality in an object, is the ground of dislike to it, an increased knowledge of the object and of this quality, cannot in the nature of things subdue our hostility; the taste must be changed before the object can be relished. It is precisely thus with the sinner and the truth; he dislikes the gospel for its holiness, and no increase of light will vanquish his enmity to it. Consequently, however earnest the preacher's manner, and however scriptural his matter, no saving result will follow--unless the Spirit gives his blessing. Yet preaching is as necessary as if all were done by it alone, without the Spirit, because it is by this means that the Spirit usually works in the conversion of sinners. And since it is by appropriate means that he accomplishes his purposes, there is nothing in this doctrine to discourage exertion.

There are means which carry in themselves the rational hope, if not the promise, of success. God will not accept the lame sacrifice, nor send down the signs of his approval on service which involves no real effort of heart or mind in his cause. The influence of the Holy Spirit comes not as a bounty upon indolence—but as a stimulus to exertion. His office is not to give the human faculties a license to slumber—but to supply man with motives to watchfulness. His descent upon the church is not as the torpor which betokens disease—but as an element of activity bespeaking moral and spiritual health.

God is unquestionably sovereign in the dispensation of this blessed influence. He gives it in such measures, on such occasions, and to such instruments, as it seems good to him. He who directs the course of the clouds, and causes them to drop their treasures where and when he pleases, makes the dew of his grace, and the rain of his Spirit, to fall according to the counsel of his own will. There is no such necessary connection between the exhibition of the truth and the conversion of the soul, as there is between the application of fire and the combustion of inflammable matter. The apostle says, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos—but ministers by whom you believed, even as God gave to every man. I have planted, Apollos watered—but God gave the increase. So then, neither is he who plants anything, neither he who waters. But God who gives the increase." One would think it impossible to mistake the meaning of this language, or to doubt whether special Divine influence be necessary for the conversion of the soul, or whether the communication of it be a prerogative of Divine sovereignty.

Still there is every ground to expect the influence we need. It is our privilege to live under the dispensation of the Spirit, as well as under that of the Messiah. The former of these is connected with the latter—or perhaps more correctly speaking they are identical; the covenant established in Christ's blood is the economy of the Spirit. The ministry of reconciliation is the ministry of the Spirit. I

do not mean to represent the divine influence of the Holy Spirit, as confined to the Christian economy, for since the beginning of time no soul has been converted or sanctified but by his heavenly power. But the communications of it before the coming of Christ were limited, partial, and scanty--compared with what they have been since—they constituted not the 'shower'—but only the 'drops' which precede it. Hence the language of the evangelist, "This He spoke of the Spirit, who those who believe on him should receive, for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." This idea, that we are under the Spirit's economy, should enlarge our expectations of rich communications of his invaluable and essential blessing.

The view I have given of **Divine sovereignty** is not intended, nor when rightly understood, is it calculated, to discourage hope—but simply to **teach dependence**. While God reserves to himself the right of bestowment, and acts upon his own rules of communication, he warrants and invites the most comprehensive requests, and the largest anticipations. Since he has promised to give the blessing in answer to the prayer of faith, it would seem to be our own fault that we have it not in more abounding measure. The very recollection of our privilege in being placed under such an economy, might seem to be enough to call forth our prayers and to awaken our expectations. Instead of being surprised that so much of this Divine power accompanies our ministry in the most successful periods of our history; we should be surprised that we receive so little of it, and enquire after the obstructing cause. In a country like Egypt, where rain seldom falls, a shower is the exception, and a dry atmosphere is the general rule. But in our variable climate, a long drought is the rarity, and the frequent shower is the common occurrence. The husbandman ploughs and sows in this land, with his expectant eyes upon the heavens, and feels disappointed if the fertilizing rain is withheld.

So should it be with us, in reference to the shower of God's grace. We are not in the dry and arid atmosphere of the Levitical economy—but enjoy the privilege of the dew-distilling, rain-dropping dispensation of the Spirit; and with us the question should be, why we have not more of this Divine influence, and what has provoked the Lord to withhold from us the vivifying influences of his grace. Instead of being at any time astonished that our ministry is so much blessed, we should enquire why it is not always so. When we consider what is said, that God "wills not the death of a sinner—but would rather that he should repent, and turn from his wickedness and live," when we recollect what he has done for the salvation of sinners; when we add to this, that the gospel is his own truth, and preaching his own institution, we are sometimes ready to wonder that he does not pour out that influence which is necessary to give effect to the purposes of his own benevolence, and almost to enquire, "What does the Lord now wait for?" In answer to this it may be replied, "He waits for the earnest labors of his ministers, the faith of his church, and the believing prayers of both."

It is quite perceptible that the necessity of Divine influence is rather a dogma of faith, than a principle of practice, both with ministers and their flocks. Did the people really believe it, were it matter of inwrought conviction, and were there the least seriousness of spirit in their religion, how much less dependence would there be upon 'men', how much less would there be said about talent, how much less homage would be paid to genius and eloquence--and how much more looking up to 'God' by intense and persevering supplication would there be! Recollecting that God works by means, and by means adapted to promote his ends, there would be no danger of sinking into an enthusiastic and irrational neglect of them. But on the contrary there would be more constant and serious attendance upon them. The knowledge that preaching, and especially earnest preaching, is the Spirit's instrumentality, would lead men to seek that instrumentality, in order that they might have that blessing.

How highly would it exalt the minister to consider him as the Spirit's instrument, and how important would it make the sermon to regard it as God's means to bless the soul! To view ministers and sermons apart from the work of God is immeasurably to sink both; it is to cease to view the preacher as an ambassador of Christ, and instead of it, to listen to him only as a lecturer on religion. With what sacred awe and with what fervent prayer would he be heard, by those who viewed him as the appointed medium of that influence, which, if received, would illuminate, renew, and sanctify their souls!

But if it be incumbent on the people to remember the dependence of means upon the Divine blessing, how much more so is it the duty of ministers? It is an article of our creed, it is often the subject of our sermons, and it is acknowledged in our prayers. But after all, is our conviction of "dependence upon the Spirit" so deep, practical, and constant, as to prevent us from attempting anything in our own strength, and make us to feel strong only in the Lord and in the power of his might? Do we conduct the pursuits of our studies, as well as regulate the prayers of our closets, under this conviction? Do we with child-like simplicity, and in the spirit which we inculcate upon our hearers in reference to their personal salvation, habitually give ourselves up to the guidance and blessing of this Divine Agent? Do we look up for divine wisdom to guide us in the selection of our texts, and the composition of our sermons? Do our eyes and our hearts go up to heaven, as we think and write for our people? Do we go to our pulpit in a praying frame, as well as in a preaching one; praying even while we preach, for our people, as well as for ourselves? Do we thus clothe ourselves with Omnipotence, and go forth as with the Lord ever with us? Do we recollect that from all that crowd of immortal souls before us, we shall gather nothing but human praise or censure, except the Lord be with us; that not one dark mind will be illumined, not one hard heart softened, not one inquiring soul directed, not one wounded spirit healed, not one uneasy conscience appeased, unless God the Spirit does it?

Do we really want to accomplish those objects--or merely to deliver a sermon that will please the people, and gratify our own vanity? If the former, how entire,

how confident, how believing, should be our sense of dependence upon something far higher than the best and most appropriate instrumentality! Such a feeling of dependence would cramp none of the energies of our soul, would stunt none of our powers, quench none of our fire, repress none of our intensity of manner. So far from it, we would derive from it unspeakable advantage in addressing our hearers. A seriousness, tenderness, and majesty, beyond what the greatest unassisted talent could command, would pervade our discourses. A superhuman influence would rest upon us. A Divine glory would irradiate us. And we would speak in the power and demonstration of the Spirit!

"Possessed of this celestial unction, we would be under no temptation to neglect a plain gospel, in quest of amusing speculations and unprofitable novelties; the most ordinary topics would open themselves with a freshness and interest, as though we had never considered them before; and the things of the Spirit would display their inexhaustible variety and depth. We shall pierce the invisible world, we shall look, so to speak, into eternity, and present the very essence and core of religion, while too many preachers, for lack of spiritual discernment, rest satisfied with the surface and the shell. We shall not allow ourselves to throw one grain of incense on the 'altar of vanity', and shall forget ourselves so completely, as to convince our hearers we do so; and displacing everything else from the attention, leave nothing to be felt or thought of—but the majesty of truth, and the realities of eternity!" (Hall "The Discouragements and Support of the Christian Ministry")

The preacher who cherishes such a frame of mind will appear with a radiance not less dazzling perhaps than that of genius, and far more sacred heavenly and divine; and when carried to his highest pitch of earnestness and dependence upon God, he will seem almost to reach the sublime symbol of the apocalypse, of the angel standing in the sun. "But this kind goes not forth but by fasting and prayer." **A deep, practical conviction of the need of the Spirit, would make us men of prayer, would send us to our closets, and keep us there!** Here perhaps is the cause why we have not more success in our ministry, and are not more frequently and more heartily gladdened by the conversion of souls to God; we seek to be men of the pulpit merely, and are not sufficiently men of the closet. It is a mystery in God's moral government that he should make the communications of his grace for the salvation of sinners dependent in any degree upon the prayers of others; yet he does so, and we know it; and yet knowing it, how little have we been affected by it, and stirred up to prayer on this account! We have uttered our complaints of the fruitlessness of our ministry long enough before one another. But, as Wilson says in his introduction to the 'Reformed Pastor,' "One day spent in fasting and prayer to God, is worth a thousand days of complaint and lamentation before men!"

The author of this work can assure his brethren that it is not with any disposition to accuse them, and exalt or exculpate himself, that he writes thus. He takes his full share of blame for his deficiency of a spirit of fervent prayer, and his full share

of humiliation on this account. The activities of the age, which require us to be so much in public, may furnish, if not an excuse--some mitigation of blame, for the too little time spent in fervid private prayer. Devotion is damped by business. Still even with this palliation, we are verily guilty, for **we do not pray as if we believed we were sent to save souls from eternal death, and that we could not be successful in a single instance without the grace of God!** Who of us can read the diaries of such men as Doddridge, Brainerd, Payson, and Martyn, and very many others, and not stand reprov'd for our lamentable deficiency in the exercise of earnest prayer?

Perhaps in modern times there was never so much of social prayer, and never less of private prayer. We introduce all our business transactions with prayer—but too often in a business spirit, and with a sad lack of sincerity, seriousness, and deep devotion; so that the very frequency and lack of reverence with which we engage in such exercises of devotion, tends to diminish the spirit of prayer. Nothing is more to be dreaded than a depression of the spirit of devotion, and nothing more intensely to be desired than its elevation. **A praying ministry must be an earnest one--and an earnest ministry a praying one!**

Let us then feel ourselves called upon by all the circumstances of the times to abound more and more in fervent supplications. Let us, if we can in no other way command more time for prayer, take it from study or from sleep. We have neither right nor reason to expect the Spirit, if we do not ask for his gracious influence--for without him we can do nothing. Let us take care lest the bustling activity, and the endless multiplication of societies, should supplant, instead of calling forth, the feeling of intense devotion. We never more **needed** prayer--we were never more in danger of **neglecting** it. There is plausibility in the excuse that we had better abridge the time of praying than the time of acting. But it will be found in the end, that doings carried on at the neglect of prayer, will end in confusion and vanity. Ministry in the cause of godliness, however prevalent or energetic--if it be not maintained in a feeling of dependence upon God--will be regarded by him as the 'image of jealousy' in the temple. Our sermons are the power of man, or perhaps we might say his weakness. But our prayers are in a modified sense, the power of God.

Let us not slacken in preaching—but let us abound more in prayer; let us not quench a ray of intellect—but let us add to it the warmth of devotion; let us labor as if the salvation of souls depended upon our own unaided energies--and then let us feel as the apostle did when he said, "though I am nothing." The eternal destinies of our hearers hang not only upon our sermons but upon our prayers; we carry out the purposes of our mission, not only in the pulpit—but in the closet; and may never expect to be successful ministers of the New Covenant—but by this two-fold importunity in first beseeching sinners to be reconciled to God, and then beseeching God to pour out his Spirit upon them—thus we honor his wisdom in the use of the means he has appointed, and then his power by confessing our dependence upon his grace.

Baxter concludes his "Reformed Pastor" with an expression of his confidence in the usefulness of the book he had written, which it would be unwarrantable and ridiculous vanity in me to adopt in reference to mine, in any other way than that of hope and prayer. But in this spirit I borrow the language of that great and holy man, and say, "I am now, brethren, done with my advice, and leave you to the practice. Though the proud receive it with scorn, and the selfish and slothful with distaste, or even with indignation--I doubt not but God will use it, in despite of the opposition of sin and Satan, to the awakening of many of his servants to their duty, and to the promotion of a work of right reformation; and that his blessing will accompany the present undertaking--for the saving of many souls--for the peace of you who undertake and perform it--and for the increase of the purity and unity of his churches. Amen."

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