

Shortly { UNIFORM, PART II., "HOW TO DISCOURAGE YOUR
CONGREGATION." AN OPEN CHARGE TO MINISTERS.

How to Discourage your Minister.

A PRACTICAL OPEN CHARGE,

ADDRESSED TO ALL MEMBERS OF
CONGREGATIONS.

BY THE

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HOW TO DISCOURAGE YOUR MINISTER.

“And he set the priests in their charges, and encouraged them in the service of the House of the Lord.”—2 CHRON. xxxv. 2.

KING JOSIAH went about things in the right way. He desired a revival of religion throughout the Church and State of Israel, and he began by setting the ministers of religion in their charges, and giving them encouragement to do their duty faithfully there. The old abominations had been departed from, the Book of the Law had been read and accepted as the guide of life and worship, and now, during all the days of King Josiah, Israel the Stiff-necked, was to depart no more from following the God of their fathers.

Baldom was for the time destroyed, though the dragon's teeth for the next crop were already a-sowing. Groves and images were firewood, and their makers became hewers of wood of a more innocent kind. The priests of Baal and Ashtoreth hid themselves in the fastnesses of the hill country, or withdrew into exile in Phœnicia or Syria. The priesthood of Jehovah resumed by command of the king, their long-usurped functions, and Josiah completed his work by guaranteeing them in their charges. Nor was his aid material only, for the king did not leave them there to struggle alone among indifferent or hostile flocks. He encouraged them with wise sympathy and practical help to the faithful performance of their spiritual duties.

Had he been more modern he might have said, “What more do the priests and Levites need encouragement than the other workmen in my country? Why should I encourage them any more than I encourage the lawyers, the builders, the goldsmiths of Jerusalem?”

If Josiah did ask himself this question, he evidently answered his own question correctly. The spiritual workers needed to be encouraged, because their work among a people so averse to true religion, so worldly and indifferent, made sympathy a necessity to them. If they were to be the fountains of encouragement, encouraging others to seek things pure, lovely, and of good report, they needed all good men's encouragement, every influential man's support, and the hearty benediction of the king himself.

In all this King Josiah showed himself wise beyond his years and his time. He saw that religion was not to be re-established in the land by royal edict, nor by organising it as a State department, nor yet by placing men in responsible positions and then abandoning them to their own resources. He penetrated to the truth, too much forgotten now-a-days, that those who are to do spiritual work in any sphere, depend for much of their power and efficiency upon the attitude and support of those among whom they labour.

Josiah did not expect too much from his priests. He knew well that they were men who yearned for sympathy, and who would work the better for a little encouragement. He did not take them to be proud men, who needed to be kept humble by royal discouragement, whilst their congregations saw to it that they were kept poor. He not only arranged for their sufficient maintenance, on the ground that the labourer is worthy of his hire, but he also did not withhold that precious word of sympathy and understanding, which is a reward of honest work done, much more to be desired than any minted gold.

The congregation now does the first part of the work of King Josiah. It chooses the spiritual teacher, and sets him in his charge; but it does not always pass on to the second part, and encourage him in the service of the house of the Lord. This ought ye to have done, and yet not to leave the other undone.

This brings us to a fundamental axiom concerning the mutual influence of pastor and people:—

The congregation, by its attitude of encouragement or discouragement, forms the minister, and makes or mars his success quite as much as the minister influences and moulds the congregation.

Mr. Andrew Lang has recently written a brilliant little book which bears the title, "How to Fail in Literature." It is necessary to preach to Christian congregations a sermon entitled, "*How to Discourage your Minister.*" Perhaps, however, this is a lesson that too many congregations already know by heart. It is like original sin in children—bred in the bone, and bound to come out in the flesh.

It is by no means, therefore, a work of supererogation to inquire into one or two favourite methods of *Minister-Discouragement* which have been found most effective, and which are consequently most widely used. This inquiry is to proceed without prejudice to a future parallel one as to the ways in which ministers may discourage their congregations—for *Congregation-Discouraging* is almost as general, though not so consciously pursued, as that art of which we at present speak, the Art—nay, shall we not say the Science—of Discouraging your Minister.

Scientific methods vary with exceeding rapidity, and it is possible that some alluded to hereafter are already superseded in highly civilised communities, but just as an old-fashioned blunderbuss may be exceedingly effective at short range from the back of a hedge, so these time-honoured methods are employed even yet with conspicuous success in primitive neighbourhoods.

1. The first method to which we ask your attention is also usually first in time. It may be called mnemonically the **OLD BOTTLE METHOD.**

When a young minister comes to a charge, he usually has to succeed a man of much riper experience and more complete local knowledge, as well as a man with whose methods the congregation has been for many years familiar. Often the congregation makes the mistake—the age of which at least gives it a claim to respectability—that the new wine will be safest in the old bottles. Sometimes the congregation hints this to the minister; sometimes they simply hold the mouths of the ancient bottles open, and decline to take the wine in any other vessels. Either, therefore, the wine misses the mouths of the old bottles, or filling them, they burst according to the parable. In either case the wine is lost, and the ground not the richer. To be plainer, if not less parabolic, we may put the matter thus—if the new minister bring the good wine of the Gospel with him, it is better to be content to drink it

out of the vessels which he provides. A man's methods are as much part of him as his matter or spirit. They are the nature of the man working practically, and if they be hampered or altered against his will, he will never work up to the measure of his powers. Give your minister a fair chance, methods and all—in ten years you may be as wedded to the new ways as you are now to the old.

II. Again, there is an attitude which a congregation sometimes assumes towards a newly-ordained minister which is the exact contrary of that which King Josiah took. We may call this second attitude of discouragement the **CONDESCENDINGLY CRITICAL**. How calm, how serene, how lofty is the smile which says, "Here is a young man who thinks he is going to turn the world upside down; let him alone for a little and his ardour will soon cool off: in a year or two we will see what he makes of it." So they pride themselves upon their moderation, which being interpreted means their indifference, and upon their caution which is laziness, and never give Josiah's encouraging grip of the hand, or lay a shoulder beside his at the wheel.

So the young man who came cherishing great hopes, and keeping a high ideal before him, yearning eagerly for sympathy, gradually loses his warmth, and like most cooling bodies, he contracts within himself, till the mere unresponsive apathy of his congregation may make him even as themselves. It is easy to say that a man should have an inner fire of the Spirit of Encouragement within himself, but even a man who can keep this alight needs the fuel of human appreciation and sympathy. A body however hot, will in time take the temperature of the atmosphere in which it is placed; and it is probable that a minister, unless he is a very exceptional man indeed, will eventually take the temperature of his congregation.

Did you ever try to keep in a wood-fire on a pouring wet day in the open? We remember once struggling on a high mountain camping-ground to keep our precious fire alight. The heavy sullen rain came plumping solidly down, as it had been doing for hours, and in the hollow of a great tree we were nursing a little glowing spark to keep us in warmth. Every time a gust drove round the corner we huddled closer to ward the drops from the precious flame. Every few minutes some of us would leave the shelter to find some dry

sticks or moss further among the trees, only to return wetter and more disconsolate than before. Bit by bit we drew closer, bit by bit the wet encroached on the weakening flicker of the flames, till at last we were left in hopeless misery, staring at the hissing embers. At the time it seemed as if our only friend were dead and we were mourning over his bier. So the blank night shut down upon our woe.

In just such a way, the fire of high youthful resolve and enthusiasm, which might have set a whole countryside on fire, is often extinguished by the steady drip of discouragement. There is the voice which says at the first sign of check or want of success, "There, we told you, it is just as we expected; no good can come out of these new-fangled ways."

III. Then there is the CANDID FRIEND, who comes upon Friday or Saturday evenings, when the minister has the steam up, and his brain-machinery is working at high pressure upon the Sunday sermon, and feels constrained to put a little sand in the bearings by informing him what Mr. Such-an-one said of him in confidence, or what was the latest criticism upon his last week's sermon delivered by the parish oracle. This helps preparation amazingly, and sometimes two candid friends relieve guard week about—one down, the other come on!

Generally the candid friend may take it for granted that anything that it is for the minister's good to hear, he will hear quickly enough, and it is certain that the work of many a Sabbath morning is poorer because of injudicious interruptions at the time of preparation. Yet the cause is almost always only thoughtlessness or mistaken friendliness.

We do not refer, of course, to the barbed arrows of enmity which sometimes come to a minister, bearing very plain the hall-mark of the devil. THE ANONYMOUS LETTER-WRITER is not so much abroad in our churches as he (or she) used to be some years ago. A sensible man will, of course, put every unsigned letter to the back of the fire unread, but a few experiences of this kind may do mortal injury to a sensitive mind. We know a good and able young minister of blameless character, who was clearly driven out of his mind by such diabolical persecution. He attempted to take his own life more than once, and finally became perfectly insane. The man or woman who writes an unsigned letter to hurt

another, may depend upon it that the devil is at their elbow while it is being penned, nor will he trouble himself much about them afterwards either, for he thinks himself, in the long run, quite sure of all anonymous letter-writers—an opinion in which he does not stand alone.

Except on rare occasions, the honest candid friend would serve his minister better by remaining under his own vine and fig tree, for the minister is not helped but hindered by hearing what malicious or hypercritical people say about him. There is still living a good minister and excellent preacher who lost all influence in his congregation, and was compelled to resign his charge, simply because he gave too ready attention to retailed stories. The minister's ear should be ever open to all sorrows of the heart that may be intrusted to him, and his help will surely be ready to the utmost, but his special want is to be encouraged in his own soul; above all, he needs the knowledge that his ministrations are having some actual effect upon the lives of those among whom he labours.

IV. We have briefly mentioned three accepted methods of discouragement, none of them to be despised, but none of them so potent or successful as that which we have to consider next. This method we may call the GRAND SERMON plan. It works in this way. As the congregation which is possessed of a desire to discourage a too sanguine young man disperses, it cannot do better than pass this saying about, "*A grand sermon yon, but no practical.*" Once thoroughly indoctrinate your minister with the knowledge that whatever he preaches concerning duty or living, is understood by his people to be simply a pious opinion good to listen to on Sunday, and by no means to be thought of as worth any consideration upon Monday, and you effectually scuttle the gallant ship of his enthusiasm. Down down she will go in the deep sea of indifference—all hands on board! "*A grand sermon yon, but no practical*"—*no, because you won't practise it!*

There is nothing easier to a preacher than to vary a subject indefinitely so as to produce an endless succession of "sermons," which a congregation will accept as "just about his average." The minister is to blame, you say, for not giving something original; well, perhaps he is; but he is not one-half so culpable as the congregation which owing to

indifference and wilful blindness sees no more in sermons upon which the best time and thought have been spent, than on those which are only the old dust beat from the pulpit cushions. What wonder that many a minister finds it more profitable (as it is certainly easier) to thump than to study? If a minister sees that the congregation do not care what he gives them, he soon ceases to care also, for an indifferent congregation makes a common-place preacher. He may spend his whole life with you slowly grinding sermons as monotonously as a barrel-organ grinds its one tune—a tune which, indeed, may be varied by beginning at the middle or the end, but which, wherever begun, is undoubtedly and essentially the same old tune.

Consider for a moment a minister, in a moderately large charge, has probably from 150 to 200 public appearances to make in a year. Just think of that, members of mutual improvement associations, debating societies, occasional political speakers, and remember how much time and labour your half-dozen or so exact from you. Let me tell you that it is a minister's greatest difficulty to keep his matter fresh and original, and his manner simple and natural. So exceedingly difficult is it that many men give up the attempt, and are reduced to giving the old sermon-barrel another turn stolidly and contentedly to the end of the chapter.

"I don't think the minister was very bright this morning," says one who did not yawn himself to bed till the small hours of the Sunday morning. "That was a dreadfully dull sermon," says another sleepy afternoon-hearer, whose good dinner has spoiled an appetite for sermons, never very sharp-set at the best.

The greatest living preacher says, "I have listened to many sermons from preachers, called poor, in all the corners of the country, and I never heard one which did not teach me something,—IF I WAS IN THE SPIRIT TO PROFIT BY IT." Ah! that last clause needs to be printed in the largest capitals, and proclaimed with the firmest emphasis. It is the "spirit to profit" that is necessary, and that is exactly what is most frequently lacking. Let your minister see that his words, if they be true words appealing to your consciences, are not falling dead upon you, but that his teaching is really influencing your life. This is the true way to encourage his heart and to enlarge his usefulness.

So if your minister asks you as a favour to himself to turn out better at the Week-Night Service, a good way to discourage him is to PAY NO ATTENTION TO HIS REQUESTS, and let him see the prayer meeting gradually growing thinner, like the fasting man at the Westminster Aquarium. Then you can tell the minister when you meet him your excuse for being absent. He has not asked you, but you feel that there is something in his eye very like a mark of interrogation, and you have a slightly uncomfortable feeling in the region where you believe your conscience to lie. You may save yourself the trouble. The minister knows all the excuses by heart. He says to himself, "Which is it to be this time?" It has been such stormy nights lately. You have had to take great care. It is indeed wonderful what a run of bad weather there is upon prayer meeting night. It does strike the minister, however, as a little strange that it is the men folk who are most affected by the bad weather. When he looks at the scarcity of men on the seats at the prayer meeting, he wonders if it is right any longer to call women the weaker sex. Moreover, the improvement manifest in the health of his congregation upon evenings of social entertainment is exceedingly gratifying to him. He is delighted to see the sick so soon restored to health. Engagements, too, have a way of multiplying on prayer meeting evenings. Owing to its awkward situation, it is more difficult to find time to get down to the church than anywhere else. Seriously, this is not at all as it ought to be, and gives cause to the enemy to blaspheme. They say, and have too much reason to say, "These Christians go to church on Sunday because they would be looked down upon for staying away, but they won't give an hour a-week out of their own time to pray to their God." It is indeed too true that many go to church upon Sunday morning for the same reason that the bits of straw and scraps of paper on a station platform follow in the wake of the "Flying Scotsman" as it rushes through at full speed.

V. We have unconsciously shaded into the next form of successful discouragement, which we may label for distinction, the CONFERRING-A-FAVOUR plan. "'Deed, minister, an' it's verra kind o' ye to look in so often; noo, if it's a rael guid day on Sabbath, an' I'm no' that tired, I wull may come doon the brae and gie ye a day's hearin'. Ae guid turn deserves another!" Give your minister distinctly to understand that

each attendance, except perhaps the regulation roll-call on Communion mornings, ought in your opinion to be put down as a favour conferred on him and as a reluctant martyrdom for yourself, and that an occasional appearance at the prayer meeting or evening service is sufficient to condone months of carelessness and even the rough handling of a good deal of the Decalogue. The self-satisfied air of the *Do-the-minister-a-good-turn* hearer betrayeth him. His restlessness also, which manifested itself in a devotion to his watch, and an uncertainty whether he can sit easiest with his right leg crossed over his left, or his left resting on his right. As for the sermon or address, he endures it like any other inevitable misfortune—manfully, but he does not even try to look as if he enjoyed it, and when haply it is finished, the sigh of the sufferer almost amounts to a thanksgiving. Even the *man-who-could-do-better-himself* is a preferable auditor, for he at least attends, if only to look for points which he could improve upon—an easy matter in criticism, by the way.

An intimate friend of the Favour-Conferer is the *Professional Grumbler*, who holds the very poorest opinion of the Church and its work, and on the whole is of opinion that the best plan would be to put up the congregational shutters, dismiss the minister, and hang a ticket on the front gate, "To LET, the lowest or any offer accepted." These two are silent at the congregational prayer meetings, unheard of in congregational work, to which they would scorn to put one of their little fingers, mute in business meetings and Sunday Schools; but they hold their sederunts at street corners after they have come out, they point the finger, they wag the wise head, and they show clearly that the whole head is faint, the whole heart sick; and they severally get rid of enough dank moisture to make wet blankets for half a congregation. Few men would be more missed or less regretted.

It is, therefore, from his own congregation that a man must get his best help, and it is their lack of sympathy and practical interest that is most bitterly galling to him. What others say of him or do to him outside his own fold does not so much matter. It is those of his own flock who alone can hurt him deeply; it is in the house of his friends that he is liable to be most sorely wounded.

If a minister feels that he has his congregation behind him, he can do anything; if he knows that in the humblest

as well as the wealthiest homes of his folk there are hearts praying for him, and hands ready to come into the harvest-field at his call, evil tongues cannot do him much harm, and persecution or obloquy cast on him for doing his duty will only serve to spur him on. It is when a man cannot feel sure of his own, when he cannot be certain that there is not a traitor within the camp, that he begins to despair of successfully encountering the forces arrayed against him.

VI. Another method of discouragement common especially among the ladies of congregations may be termed the EXPECTATION OF PERFECTION Method. You must think and say that all ministers ought to be perfect according to your particular counsel of perfection, and you must let your own minister know at frequent intervals that you have a special right to require this from him. Be sure to make no allowances for him or for circumstances which may not be known to you. If he trip, knock him down at once for stumbling, and kick him when you have him down. Also ask your friends, and any acquaintances who may be interested, to come and help. This will show how high your moral standard is.

It is no exaggeration to say that many seem to hold that it is impossible for a minister to err in anything without forfeiting a right to respect and consideration. They forget that a minister has his full share of the human heritage, and is, like themselves, connected by birth with complaisant Adam and curious Eve.

A minister is told that every eye is upon him—in his quiet corner or limited circle he experiences a greater share of the fierce light which beats upon a throne than any other professional man. This is inevitable, and in some respects not unbeneficial, but it is well to remember that a true minister does not set himself up as being any better than any other humble Christian. He stands on no pedestal of superior sanctity; nay, his very position makes him (or ought to make him) exceedingly sensitive to his miserable shortcomings.

The sense that a congregation is watching a minister for the first symptom of a false step kills much honest enterprise. Rather than risk making a mistake publicly, many a man will leave many opportunities of usefulness altogether alone. He will content himself with a masterly and safe

inactivity, and do nothing rather than risk doing what might lay him open to criticism.

VII. Then there are the PETTY CONGREGATIONAL ANNOYANCES, for nothing more surely drives spiritual impetus out of a man than the constant *drip, drip* of small worries. The more spiritual he is, the more they will annoy him. Like a swarm of small stinging flies, they vex him continually. The object of these attentions may be to keep him humble, but in actual fact the effect often is to make him discontented with his position, and to open his mind for a change.

By far the greater part of the transfers of ministers from one charge to another is due to this cause. The Man on the Street, of course, says that it is another case of more stipend, but the thoughtful observer knows that it is far oftener the hope of fewer petty annoyances. He will put up with even a change of annoyances to escape the old. They may not be lighter, but they will be different. If a congregation, therefore, wishes to discourage a minister in his work, and to prepare his mind to look favourably upon possible calls, they cannot do better than instruct their representatives to keep the pastor in continual hot-water, to give no consideration to his suggestions, and to treat his humblest requests with liberal cold shoulder. Most frequently, however, very few of the congregation know anything about these annoyances till it is too late to prevent their effect.

No minister ought ever to look upon any charge as a mere way of living. If he is a man worth his salt, he should sit lightly to the emoluments of his office, and be ready at any time to demit both charge and emoluments, if the people to whom he ministers so desire it. The ties of mutual love and confidence between pastor and people strengthen as the latter see more clearly that their minister lives *for* them, and not *upon* them. And there is no tie on earth, save that of marriage, more sacred than the link between flock and shepherd, when the Good Shepherd of all the folds has them both in His keeping.

I have here purposely dwelt upon the discouragements which a minister may endure. I do not suppose any one minister endures them all, but my purpose has been to put the negative strongly, in order practically to suggest the positive. Without doubt the minister has a multitude of

faults, and sometimes thinks of himself more highly than he ought to think ; but then this is not a failing peculiar to the pulpit, and the minister needs a greater amount of support and sympathy, just because his work lies in the difficult region of spiritual activity. His calling makes him sensitive to slights and disappointments ; and the more he thinks of others and the less he thinks of himself, the fewer thanks he is likely to get for so doing. But then, as a bereaved woman said the other day, "*That is just what the minister's Master got when He was upon the earth, and went about doing good.*" Bitterly true it is that the Master's servants are "not up to sample," as the sarcastic workman said ; but they might be much liker the sample were they not left amid cold indifference or declared enmity, to sink or swim with never a friendly hand stretched out to help.

Sometimes, on the other hand, you may think that your minister is too hard upon you, and that you would be more comfortable under preaching a little less plain-spoken ; but second thoughts will tell you that though the words be terrible, and perhaps inapplicable to your case, they may be shaking some sinner's refuge of lies to its foundations.

Thousands of souls have been lost because ministers have been afraid to use strong words, or anxious to avoid giving offence. Few have been frightened away by hearing the truth too strongly put. We would rather that a minister occasionally made a mistake and said a foolish thing, than that he should be of the tribe of those who peep and mutter, hardly daring to speak above their breath. Yet strong things may be said with the gentleness of the Christ who came to die for the world, yet who vehemently denounced the Pharisees. If it is obvious that hard things are said in the spirit of love, those who hear them will say, "Faithful indeed are the wounds of a friend !"

In any case do not forget the great and unique responsibility of the preaching servant of the Lord. "If thou speakest not to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity ; but his blood will I require at thine hand."

If a sinner sit under our preaching and we warn him not, he shall perish, but of us will the Lord require his blood, when the great trump of Judgment upon the midnight throbs—

“ When the sun grows cold and the stars are old,
And the leaves of the judgment book unfold.”

Think of this when ye would sit in judgment upon a preacher's words. His dread responsibility can no man take from him; it is his own, and not another's; certainly not yours.

We have shown you how you may discourage—we ask you, finally, to encourage actively as well as to refrain from discouraging. Cease to do evil, learn to do well, and probably you will find that your minister does so too. Do not boycott him or his services because his wife's dress does not meet with your approval or your wife's. Probably it does not meet with the minister's. Do not hold him responsible if his boy throws a stone at your cat, or his terrier chases your hens; at least do not imagine that these things will affect the Sunday's services. Try a polite note, buy a bigger terrier, or watch your boy throwing stones at *his* cat.

Don't think that you won't be comfortable on earth, or safe in heaven, if you have not a pew as good as Mr. Cornerseat's. Don't blame the minister for favouring him in allocation. The minister knows nothing about it. Do not feel aggrieved at being a little crowded if the congregation increase; and if I were you I would not complain to the pastor about it. He may suggest to you that there are other churches where you may be able to obtain one pew for yourself and another for your hat. Brotherly kindness makes the best pew cushion; mutual consideration makes the plain church an earthly home; and prayer—true seeking for God—will transform bare boards and blackened rafters into the glorious floor and arched firmament of the Seventh Heaven.

A congregation can educate a minister, as a great statesman educated his party, and teach him to make the best of himself and of them; but this cannot be successfully done upon the “box-on-the-ear” and “stand-in-the-corner” plan. The shepherd's collie may make more noise for being constantly bullied, abused, and beaten, but he will not work better among the sheep or be more tender with the lambs. Moreover, it would revolutionise all shepherd-craft if the flock took to biting or throwing stones at the herd or the herd's dog. Let a congregation remember that in calling a minister they choose a servant indeed—but a servant of the Lord—to

lead and feed them by green pastures, not a "whipping-boy" to visit their displeasure upon, like the lad who was horsed for King James' royal misdemeanours. The shepherd must be paid in Josiah's coin, encouragement to his heart—not with fiddler's pay, kicks and halfpence, as a glance at the plate may sometimes suggest that he is.

Finally, Congregations of men and women whose heart God has touched, see that ye do not neglect to carry out both parts of Josiah's revival. Set your ministers in their charges, establish them there, and having made an end of that, begin and carry on the better work of encouraging their hearts in the work of the Lord. This ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. However unworthy the individual servant set over any congregation may be, the blessing to those who encourage him in well-doing is the same —
"INASMUCH AS YE DID IT UNTO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE MY BRETHREN, YE DID IT UNTO ME."

EDITED BY REV. S. R. CROCKETT.

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