

James Bautie, Student

by Alexander Whyte

The sermon explores the spiritual struggles of James Beattie, a divinity student, and how he finds comfort and guidance in the letters of Rutherford, a spiritual casuist.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:4, Philippians 2:3, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Pastoral Ministry", "Spiritual Formation"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the challenges faced by divinity students in transitioning to become effective ministers, emphasizing the need for pastoral and experimental theology education to equip students for real-life pastoral difficulties. He highlights the example of James Beattie, a divinity student of the seventeenth century, who struggled with his mental deficiencies and spiritual unfitness for ministry. Whyte discusses Beattie's journey of self-examination, including his struggle with loving God purely and his quest for assurance in his gifts and graces before entering the ministry.

Transcript

'You crave my mind.'--Rutherford.

As a rule the difficulties of a divinity student are not at all the difficulties of the best of his future people. A divinity student's difficulties are usually academic and speculative, whereas the difficulties of the best people in his coming congregation will be difficulties of the most intensely real and practical kind. And thus it is that we so often hear lately-ordained ministers confessing that they have come to the end of their resources and experiences, and have nothing either fresh or certain left to preach to the people about.

Just as, on the other hand, so many congregations complain that they look up to the pulpit from Sabbath to Sabbath and are not fed. It is not much to be wondered at that a raw college youth cannot all at once feed and guide and extricate an old saint; or that a minister, whose deepest difficulties hitherto have been mostly of the debating society kind, should not be able to afford much help to those of his people who are wading through the deep and drowning waters of the spiritual life.

And whether something could not be done by the institution of chairs of genuine pastoral and experimental theology for the help of our students and the good of our people is surely a question that well deserves the earnest attention of all the evangelical churches. Meantime we are to be introduced to a divinity student of the middle of the seventeenth century who was early and deeply exercised in those intensely real problems of the soul which occupied such a large place both in the best religious literature and in the best

pulpit work of that intensely earnest day.

James Bautie, or Beattie, as we shall here call him on Dr. Bonar's suggestion, was a candidate for the ministry such that the ripest and most deeply exercised saints in Scotland might well have rejoiced to have had such an able and saintly youth for their preacher on the Sabbath-day as well as for their pastor all the week. As James Beattie's college days drew on to an end he became more and more exercised about his mental deficiencies, and still more about his spiritual unfitness to be anybody's minister.

Beattie had, to begin with, this always infallible mark of an able man--an increasing sense of his own inability: and he had, along with that, this equally infallible mark of a spiritually-minded man--an overwhelming sense of his utter lack of anything like a spiritual mind. No man but a very able man could have written the letter that Beattie wrote about himself to Samuel Rutherford; and Rutherford's letter back to Beattie will not be a bad test of a divinity student whether he has enough of the true divinity student mind in him to read that letter, to understand it, and to translate it.

Beattie had an excellent intellect, and his excellent intellect had not been laid out at college on those windy fields that so puff up a beginner in knowledge and in life; his whole mind had been given up already to those terrible problems of the soul that both humble and exalt the man who spends his life among them. Beattie's future congregation will not vaunt themselves about their minister's ability or scholarship or eloquence; his sermons will soon push his people back behind all such superficial matters.

Beattie's preaching and his whole pastorate will soon become another illustration of the truth that it is not gifts but graces in a minister that will in the long-run truly edify the body of Christ. You have James Beattie's portrait as a divinity student in Rutherford's 249th letter, and you will find a complementary portrait of Beattie as a grey-haired pastor in Dr. Stalker's Preacher and his Models. 'He was a man of competent scholarship, and had the reputation of having been in early life a powerful and popular preacher.

But it was not to those gifts that he owed his unique influence. He moved through the town, with his white hair and somewhat staid and dignified demeanour, as a hallowing presence. His very passing in the street was a kind of benediction; the people, as they looked after him, spoke of him to each other with affectionate reverence. Children were proud when he laid his hand on their heads, and they treasured the kindly words which he spoke to them. They who laboured along with him in the ministry felt that his mere existence in the community was an irresistible demonstration of Christianity and a tower of strength to every good cause.

Yet he had not gained this position of influence by brilliant talents or great achievements or the pushing of ambition; for he was singularly modest, and would have been the last to credit himself with half the good he did. The whole mystery lay in this, that he had lived in the town for forty years a blameless life, and was known by everybody to be a godly and a prayerful man. The prime qualification for the ministry is goodness.'

Beattie as a student challenged himself severely on this account also, that some truths found a more easy and unshaken credit with him than other truths. This is a common difficulty with many of our modern students also, and how best to advise with them under this real difficulty constantly puts their professors and their pastors to the test. Whatever Beattie may have got, I confess I do not get much help in this difficulty out of Rutherford's letter back to Beattie. Rutherford, with all his splendid gifts of mind and heart, had sometimes a certain dogmatic and dictatorial way with him, and this is just the temper that our

students still meet with too often in their old and settled censurers. The 'torpor of assurance' has not yet settled on the young divine as it has done on too many of the old. There was a modest, a genuine, and an every way reasonable difficulty in this part of Beattie's letter to Rutherford, and I wish much that Rutherford had felt himself put upon his quite capable mettle to deal with the difficulty. Or, if he had not time to go to the bottom of all Beattie's deep letter, as he says he has not, he might have referred his correspondent--for his correspondent was a well-read student --to a great sermon by the greatest of English Churchmen--a sermon that a reader like Rutherford must surely have had by heart, entitled, 'A Learned and Comfortable Sermon of the Certainty and Perpetuity of Faith in the Elect.' But, unfortunately for England and Scotland both, England was thrusting that sermon and all the other writings of its author on the Church of Christ in Scotland at the point of the bayonet, and that is the very worst instrument that can be employed in the interests of truth and of ecclesiastical comprehension and conformity. And among the many things we have to be thankful for in our more emancipated and more catholic day, it is not the least that Rutherford and Hooker lie in peace and in complementary fulness beside one another on the tables of all our students of divinity.

Coming still closer home to himself, our divinity student puts this acute difficulty to his spiritual casuist: Whether a man of God, and especially a minister of Christ, can be right who does not love God for Himself, for His nature and for His character solely and purely, and apart altogether from all His benefactions both in nature and in grace. James Beattie had been brought up with such a love for the Kirk of Scotland, and for her ministers and her people; he had of late grown into such a love for his books also, and for the work of the ministry, that in examining himself in prospect of his approaching licence he had felt afraid that he loved the thought of a study, and a pulpit, and a manse, and its inhabitants, and, indeed, the whole prospective life of a minister, with more keenness of affection than he loved the souls of men, or even his Master Himself. And he put that most distressing difficulty also before Rutherford. Now there was an expression on that matter that was common in the pulpits of Rutherford's school in that day that Rutherford would be sure to quote in his second letter to Beattie, if not in his first. It was a Latin proverb, but all the common people of that day quite well understood it, not to speak of a student like Beattie. *Aliquid in Christo formosius Salvatore*, wrote Rutherford to distressed Beattie. That is to say: There is that in Christ which is far more fair and sweet than merely His being a Saviour. Never be content, that is, till you can rise up above manses and pulpits and books and sermons, and even above your own salvation, to see the pure and infinite loveliness of Christ Himself. Dost thou, O my soul, love Jesus Christ for Himself alone, and not only as thy Redeemer? Though to love Him as such He doth allow thee, yet there is that in Christ that is far more amiable than merely in His being thy Saviour. And yet the two kinds of love may quite well stand together, writes Rutherford, just as a child loves his mother because she is his mother, and yet his love leaps the more out when she gives him an apple. At the same time, to love Christ for Himself alone is the last end of a true believer's love.

It was one of the great experimental problems much agitated among the greater evangelical divines of that deep, clear-eyed, and honest day, Why the truly regenerate are all left so full of all manner of indwelling sin. We never hear that question raised nowadays, nor any question at all like that. The only difficulty in our day is why any man should have any difficulty about his own indwelling sin at all. But neither Beattie, nor Rutherford, nor any of the masters who remain to us had got so far as we.

And as for the Antinomian, perfectionist, and higher-life preachers of that day, they are all so dead and forgotten that you would not know their names even if I repeated them. Beattie, as a beginner in the spiritual life, had made this still not uncommon mistake. He had taken those New Testament passages in

which the apostles portray an ideal Christian man as he stands in the election and calling of God, and as he will be found at last and for ever in heaven, and he had prematurely and inconsequently applied all that to himself as a young man under sanctification and under the painful and humiliating beginnings of it; and no wonder that, so confusing the very first principles of the Gospel, he confused and terrified himself out of all peace and all comfort and all hope.

Now, that was just the kind of difficulty with which Rutherford could deal with all his evangelical freedom and fulness, depth and insight. No preacher or writer of that day held up the absolute necessity of holiness better than Rutherford did; but then, that only the more compelled him to hold up also such comfort as he conveys in his consoling and reassuring letter to despairing Beattie: 'Comparing the state of one truly regenerate, whose heart is a temple of the Holy Ghost, with your own, which is full of uncleanness and corruption, you stand dumb and dare not call Christ heartsomely your own.

But, I answer, the best regenerate have their defilements, and, wash as they will, there will be the filth of sin in their hearts to the end. Glory alone will make our hearts pure and perfect, never till then will they be absolutely sinless.' And if we, Rutherford's so weak-kneed successors, preached the law of God and true holiness as he preached those noble doctrines, the sheer agony of our despairing people would compel us to preach also the true nature, the narrow limits, and the whole profound laws of evangelical sanctification as we never preach, and scarce dare to preach, those things now.

They who preach true holiness best are just thereby the more compelled to preach its partial, tentative, elementary, and superficial character in this life. And the hearer who knows in the word of God and in his own heart what indeed true holiness is, will insist on having its complementary truths frequently preached to him to keep him from despair; or else he will turn continually to those great divines who, though dead, yet preach such things in their noble books. And that those books are not still read and preached among us, and that the need for them and their doctrines is so little felt, is only another illustration of the true proverb that where no oxen are the crib is clean.

James Beattie was in very good company when he said that he must have more assurance, both of his gifts and his graces, before he could enter on his ministry. For Moses, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and many another minister who could be named, have all felt and said the same thing. Now that he is near the door of the pulpit, Beattie feels that he cannot enter it till he has more certainty that it is all right with himself. But our young ministers will attain to assurance not so much by consulting Rutherford, skilled casuist in such matters as he is, as by themselves going forward in a holy life and a holy ministry. 'It is not God's design,' says Jonathan Edwards, 'that men should obtain assurance in any other way than by mortifying corruption, increasing in grace, and obtaining the lively exercises of it. Assurance is not to be obtained so much by self-examination as by action. Paul obtained assurance of winning the prize more by running than by reflecting. The swiftness of his pace did more toward his assurance of the goal than the strictness of his self-examination.' 'I wish you a share of my feast,' replies Rutherford. 'But, for you, hang on our Lord, and He will fill you with a sense of His love, as He has so often filled me. Your feast is not far off. Hunger on; for there is food already in your hunger for Christ. Never go away from Him, but continue to fash Him; and if He delays, yet come not away, albeit you should fall aswoon at His feet.' Pray, says Rutherford, and you will not long lack assurance. Work, says Edwards, and assurance of God's love will be an immediate earnest of your full wages.

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