

Book Review of  
*An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times*  
By John Angell James

Reviewed by Kevin Roberts

James, John Angell. *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993

What a true blessing to the church of God this book is. Not only should it be required reading for every pastor, but it should also be highly recommended to congregations as a means of understanding the preciousness of a godly minister, which is a true gift of God.

Though it is an elementary and obvious sentiment to one who senses a true calling of God to the pastoral ministry, the author makes a statement well into his work, which could be seen as the scarlet thread of his subject.

*“This is earnestness in preaching: when it is evident to the hearer that the preacher feels the truths he discusses.”<sup>1</sup>*

Earnestness is a necessary trait that everyone going into the pastorate needs to be reminded of over and over again. The author is tremendously effective in doing this throughout his treatment of several different aspects in pastoral ministry.

It is often the case that when reading “old” books a standard is set that seems unachievable. The saints before us lived in a day where the modern “timesaving” inventions did not cause the hard work of spending and being spent for the flock of God to be neglected. The author’s work is no exception. A standard is set forth that outlines much hard and personal work for the glory of Christ and His church. This makes the call to earnestness in ministry all the more important. A ministry without earnestness will be like a sailboat in a vacuum. A true, effectual ministry cannot exist where there is no earnestness. A pastor’s message may be filled with doctrinal truth, but without earnestness for the souls of his hearers, his message will fall on disinterested ears and unaffected hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> *An Earnest Ministry*, Page 97

*“If we turn to any department of human action we shall learn that no one can inspire a taste, much less a passion, for the object of his own pursuit, who is not himself most powerfully moved by it.”<sup>2</sup>*

In his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, John Piper describes how Albert Einstein struggled with a Christianity that worshiped so irreverently a God who created what he saw in his own limited understanding of the universe<sup>3</sup>. This, in no small degree, is a testimony to the lack of earnestness in the evangelical community today. The author makes the following statement to the shame of many in the pulpit today but also as a needful reminder to those who are making their way into the ministry:

*“Earnestness implies that the subject has not only been selected, but that it has taken full possession of the mind, and has kindled towards it an intense desire of the heart.”<sup>4</sup>*

In chapters 5 and 6, the author includes several excellent examples of earnestness in both the content and the delivery of sermons. One cannot help but be moved by the intensity, simplicity, veracity, and Holy Spirit empowerment of these great men of God. But one cannot help but also be encouraged by the counsel to keep things genuine and simple. When speaking of a Mr. Toller, the author states, *“There was an irresistible charm in his manner which threw a spell over all his hearers, and fascinated alike the learned and the illiterate; he made the latter to understand, and the former to feel.”<sup>5</sup>*

There is a danger, however, in this chapter (as well as the entire volume as mentioned earlier) where one can become discouraged rather quickly by how powerfully these men’s ministries were used and how powerless a new (or aged) minister’s ministry may seem. But the reader must be very cognizant of the fact that the legacies of these men have been preserved for the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 64

<sup>3</sup> Piper, John. *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Books, 1993; page 12

<sup>4</sup> *An Earnest Ministry*, Page 41

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 130

edification and sound direction of those who would follow. Let the examples serve as a means of blessing to the soul, a direction for the reader's praying for his own ministry, and a goad that prods towards earnestness.

In Chapter 3, one will find a tremendous amount of practical application and instruction on such contemporary subjects as the emergent, the post-modern, and the "prosperity/self-esteem-driven" church. Obviously, it is not directly referenced, but one can certainly find timeless wisdom in the following words:

*"The voices of the apostles were listened to by sages who had basked in the sunshine of Athenian wisdom, and were reverberated in startling echo from the temples and statues that had been shaken by the thunders of Cicero and Demosthenes; yet they conceded nothing to the demands of philosophy, but held forth the cross as the only object they felt they had a right to exhibit. They never once entertained the degrading notion that they must accommodate themselves to the philosophy or the taste of the age in which they lived, and the places where they ministered."*<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, the author also confronts, albeit briefly, the challenge of "the progressive development of Christian doctrine." Although this reveals itself in quite a different form in our day, the basic premise and danger is the same. Any time that the sufficiency of Christ is challenged, whether by hostility, deception, compromise, or cultural accommodation, the earnest minister will shine forth like the sun at noonday<sup>7</sup>. He will be well known by the applause of those who love the cross of Jesus and the jeering of those who deny its worth. But he will stand firm because of the grace of God that marks his ministry – earnestness. An earnest ministry is one that is gripped and empowered by the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is for the glory of Christ in the salvation of souls and the building up of the flock he has been given charge over that the earnest minister lives and dies.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 71

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 81; "...it must...be remembered that the essential nature of the gospel, as a testimony from God, to be received on the ground of its own evidence and authority, must not be altered."

As seminaries in our day prepare thousands of men each year for the ministry, the author points out in the last few pages that although a proper education should always receive high priority, much weight be given to it, and should also be the general rule, the fact must not be ignored that the Lord will use men of “ordinary means” as great leaders in His church. Those who have started their theological education and training late in life, be it formal or informal, will find great encouragement in the author’s words.

Again, it would be well for every minister of the gospel to have a worn copy of this book in his library. The author effectively displays the importance of the minister to the Lord’s church, the accountability of the minister to the church and to the Lord, and the critical need of earnestness. He then provides several practical helps to maintaining it but perhaps, more importantly, he describes how an earnest ministry might be obtained. It is here that the author addresses church life, both ecclesiastically and relationally. Polity, discipline, spirituality, and devotedness to each other are subjects that are addressed and esteemed as critical to an effective and earnest ministry<sup>8</sup>. At no time does the author diverge into man-made “helps” or attractions to strengthen the church but emphasizes the importance of prayer, the need of the Holy Spirit, and a church that does not experience “seasons” of revival but is in practice and life a church that has been revived.

The author emphasizes the fact that anything other than the gospel of Christ preached in earnestness will only serve to weaken the minister in his devotional life, his preparation, his praying, and his ministry; and this, in turn, will necessarily weaken the church.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, page 246; *“Nothing but a spiritual church can provide a spiritual ministry, and any spiritual ministry which a worldly church may have cannot be so much the result of the system, as of something extraneous to it. Even in spiritual churches, if discipline be relaxed, and worldly-minded persons be admitted, the conservative principle, the vital piety of the members, is impaired; and if at the same time there be neglect of discipline, it will be altogether lost, and heretical men come in to fill the places of those who were the preachers of the truth as it is in Jesus.”* What a remarkable commentary this is on so many of our churches today.

It is through earnestness that vigor and strength to do the hard work of the ministry is gained.

Like Paul, the earnest minister is compelled to do nothing but minister – woe to him if he does not.