

Samuel Miller

Conscientious Pastor and Teacher

By Simonetta Carr — Jun 24, 2020

In 1813, Samuel Miller was offered a position as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at the newly established Princeton Theological Seminary. At that time, the Seminary had only one teacher, who was also its founder and president: Archibald Alexander. Miller accepted the offer after much prayer and consideration.

While reflecting on his task ahead and the unusual situation of working as second-in-charge in a two-men administration, he wrote a short list of resolutions. Making resolutions is still a common practice, and it was so particularly at that time (most people are familiar with Jonathan Edwards' 70 resolutions). Miller made only seven. What stands out about them is their focus on the task ahead and a tremendous sense of responsibility, born of his concern for God's glory and the men who were to be committed to his care.

After resolving to remember who he was as a servant of Christ for the benefit of his students, he focused on his upcoming relationship with Alexander: "Resolved, that I will endeavor, by the grace of God, so to conduct myself toward my colleague in the seminary, as never to give to give the least reasonable ground of offence. It shall be my aim, by divine help, ever to treat him with the most scrupulous respect and delicacy, and never to wound his feelings, if I know how to avoid it." ¹

He knew by experience (through a difficult relationship in New York) that avoiding giving offense to others was not enough. "By the grace of God," he added, "I will, in no case, take offence at his treatment of me."

On this last clause, he was both emphatic and specific. He was determined to do it, he said, "whatever may be the sacrifice of my personal feelings - whatever may be the consequence - I will not take offence, unless I am called upon to relinquish truth or duty. I not only will never, the Lord helping me, indulge a jealous, envious, or suspicious temper toward him; but I will, in no case, allow myself to be wounded by any slight, or appearance of disrespect. I will give up all my own claims, rather than let the cause of Christ suffer by animosity or contest. What am I, that I should prefer my own honor or exaltation to the cause of my blessed Master?" ²

Shaping Experiences

Miller's resolutions were a product of his experience and of lessons learned – often the hard way. Born in Dover, Delaware, in 1769, Miller studied at the University of Pennsylvania and earned a license to preach in 1781. In 1793, he accepted a call to be a pastor of the First Presbyterian church of New York City, and remained in that city until his call to Princeton.

They were challenging times in more ways than one. New York and Philadelphia were both hit by repeated epidemics of yellow fever (Samuel's older brother Joseph was one of its victims). Miller became also involved in the intellectual and political discussions of the day, which were as complex as they are today. Although he came from a family of slave-holders, he spoke firmly against the institution of slavery, which he saw as "inconsistent with justice." ³ He promoted gradual emancipation, in an effort to educate enslaved people and give them tools to thrive on their own.

¹ Samuel Miller, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Miller*, Vol. 2, Philadelphia, PA: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1869, p. 10 [http://library.logcollegepress.com/Miller%2C+Jr.%2C+Samuel+-+Life+of+Samuel+Miller+\(Volume+2\).pdf](http://library.logcollegepress.com/Miller%2C+Jr.%2C+Samuel+-+Life+of+Samuel+Miller+(Volume+2).pdf)

² Ibid.

³ Samuel Miller, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Miller*, Vol. 1, Philadelphia, PA: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1869, p. 91 [http://library.logcollegepress.com/Miller%2C+Jr.%2C+Samuel+-+Life+of+Sam...+\(Volume+1\).pdf](http://library.logcollegepress.com/Miller%2C+Jr.%2C+Samuel+-+Life+of+Sam...+(Volume+1).pdf)

Later in life, however, Miller regretted yielding to the “sore temptation.”⁴ of political involvement, at a time when he should have been totally devoted to pastoral care. “For though ministers have the rights and duties of citizens,” he said, “and, probably, in most cases, ought to exercise the right of voting at elections; yet when party politics run high, and when their appearing at the polls cannot take place without exciting strong feelings on the part of many against them; and when their ministry among all such persons will be therefore much less likely to be useful, I cannot think that their giving their votes can have an importance equivalent to the injury it is likely to do. I think I was wrong in talking, and acting, and rendering myself so conspicuous as a politician, as I did. I fear I did an amount of injury to my ministry, which could by no means have been counterbalanced by my usefulness as a politician.”⁵

He especially retracted his previous backing of Thomas Jefferson, denouncing him not only as an “infidel” (Jefferson was a Deist), but also as a “selfish, insidious, and hollow-hearted” “hypocritical demagogue” with “little judgment and no moral principle.”⁶ While changing political sides after further investigation is a normal occurrence, this experience persuaded Miller of the detrimental nature of political backings in a pastoral ministry.

For this reason, he became especially careful “in the pulpit, never to allow myself, either in prayer or preaching, to utter a syllable from which it might be conjectured on which side of the party politics of the day I stood.”⁷

Training Pastors

When Princeton Theological Seminary first opened its doors to students, both Miller and Alexander were in their forties. They were both highly educated, had acquired a great deal of pastoral experience, and were firmly committed to the Seminary’s goal of training pastors who would be able to defend Christian orthodoxy at a time when it was suffering under vicious and insidious attacks.

While Miller valued the revivals that had brought refreshment to the church, he also warned about their dangers, including “a disposition to undervalue the stated and ordinary ministrations of the gospel”⁸ and a growing number of preachers who believed that enthusiasm was more important than training. Princeton Theological Seminary was founded to correct these lacks, and kept faithful to that task so for much of its existence.

Miller trained the students through his regular lectures, his copious writings (including a manual on preaching), and his sermons.⁹ To him, preaching was a spiritual calling that an ordained pastor could never put aside in this life. His commitment to remain faithful to this calling and never merge his office “as a minister of the gospel in that of professor”¹⁰ was part of his seven resolutions.

He also determined to be a sample to his students. To this purpose, his resolutions included a commitment to “set a double guard” against attitudes that had proved deleterious in his life, such

⁴ Ibid., p. 128

⁵ Ibid, p. 132

⁶ Ibid. Miller’s biographer goes on to explain how Miller justified these accusations.

⁷ Samuel Miller, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Miller*, Vol. 2, p. 11.

⁸ Samuel Miller, “Thoughts on Lay Preaching,” in *The Christian Advocate*, ed. by Ashbel Green, Vol. 1, Philadelphia, PA: E. Littell, 1823, p. 12

⁹ To read works by and about Miller, see <https://www.logcollegepress.com/samuel-miller-17691850>

¹⁰ Samuel Miller, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Miller*, Vol. 2, p. 10.

as “indulgence in jesting and levity,” which could easily be exacerbated by having “so many clergymen ... collected in one village.”¹¹

Instead, he promoted “those manners which become the Christian gentleman: which naturally flow from the meekness, gentleness, purity, and benevolence of our holy religion; and which both the precepts and examples of the Bible equally recommend.”¹²

“See to it that you seek unceasingly not ‘your own things’ (cf. Phil. 2:21), your own aggrandizement, your own honor, your own fancies, or your own speculations,” he told his students, “but ‘the things which Jesus Christ’s.’ If you cannot benefit the church (and no man has a right to say that he cannot, if he has a heart for the purpose), at least do not lend your influence to the unhallowed work of corrupting and dividing it. And if you should ever be brought into circumstances in which you can do nothing else, see that you be found, like the ‘ministers of the Lord’ of old, ‘weeping between the porch and the altar, and saying, Spare thy people, O, Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach; save them, and lift them up forever!’ (cf. Joel 2:17).”¹³

To these teachings he devoted the rest of his life. He continued to teach until 1849, when his health forced him to retire, and died the following year, leaving behind his wife Sarah and his ten children. One of his sons, Samuel Miller Jr., wrote a two-volume biography of his father. Sarah, who had been an invaluable assistant to her husband since their marriage in 1801, continued to devote much of her time to child education and various charitable activities until her death in 1861.¹⁴

Together with Alexander and other teachers who joined them later or succeeded them, Miller helped to train a generation of preachers who labored “to diffuse, in every direction, the holy and benign influence of truth.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sam. Miller, *Letters on Clerical Matters and Habits*, New York, NY: G. & C. Carvill, 1827, p. 20

¹³ Sam. Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions*, Princeton, NJ: D.A. Borrestein, 1824, pp. 76-77.

¹⁴ For more information about Sarah Miller and her secret battle with depression, see <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/sarah-miller-and-her-secret-turmoil>

¹⁵ Ibid.