

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE PELICAN AND THE NEST.¹

BY THE REV. CANON S. A. JOHNSTON, Rector of South Somercotes, Louth, Lines.

THE symbol of Corpus Christi, always the reminder of the "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice" once offered for the sin of the world. But beyond that it is also the symbol of loving yearning for the welfare of those who have been redeemed and purchased with the life-blood. Himself the ransom, He is also the food. Himself He gave; Himself He continually gives, that the divine life may be nourished in us.

The method of nourishment is, apart from the sacramental gift in the Holy Communion, that of delegation. At Holy Baptism the child is handed over to the care of godparents with practically the words of Pharaoh's daughter, "Take this child away and nurse it for me." (Ex. ii. 9). That responsibility is far too easily assumed. No child in physical growth is left to the care of those who never have had any training in the upbringing of a child and never intend to take the slightest interest in its welfare. But in the spiritual sphere more often than not, no provision is made by the Church to see that this child of Christ's is cared for, and nurtured by those whose own experience will be a guarantee of tender, loving, fostering care. No provision for the future care of the child has been more scandalously neglected than that of the choice of fit and proper persons to stand for the child at the font. The fault largely lies with the clergy, who do not, as a whole, demand that the godparents should have received the gift of Confirmation.

At the outset of its career the child of God is accepted as their special charge by careless and indifferent, if not directly ungodly people. Far, far better no godparents than those who by their own life will afterwards give the lie to their profession. The faith of the child lost in the individual who promises in their name to forsake evil and love good, means full too often the destruction of faith in the God whom that wicked person dares to represent.

There is no scandal of the Church to-day that more needs immediate attention than this. Either abolish the office or make it effective. It can be made effective by a strict rule as to those who

¹ Paper read before the Louthesk East Rural-Decanal Chapter.

undertake the duty, and a careful register of the child's future movements up to the "years of discretion." This would not be difficult if done on a definite plan by the whole Church. It means a proper scheme of commendation from parish to parish as part of the duty of every parish priest. It also means that, though a certain number would be lost sight of, those who desired would have their own record for the use of the Church throughout all their life. Then Holy Baptism would mean something to every one. Now it means a clear and definite entry into sacramental life to the few; and the scorn and derision of the many. The children are handed to the Church to nurture and tend, and they are left as waifs and strays, a few only of whom will find a cottage home and a devout mother to care for them.

If we begin badly it is hardly to be wondered at that we proceed in a haphazard way. Probably only about a quarter of the children of our land—our Christian land with its National Church—receive anything like adequate religious instruction in our schools. Less than half the children in elementary schools are under definite religious influence. What is taught in the majority is the bare record of Bible events without note or comment of a clearly Christian and religious kind. But the children in the elementary schools are generally better taught in this way than in many of the large public schools and secondary schools. The child of middle-class parents is often far less instructed in the faith than his poorer compatriot. The poor child—as the poor parent—is the easy quest of the rather patronising church worker, and the child of those in higher circumstances is left alone—even as its parents are. Why is it that the evangelist always evangelizes the poor? Christ died for all, and the rich, or the snug well-to-do, have (in a sense) far more need of the preaching of the Cross than the poor.

The children of the Church are left to grow up as best they may until the most difficult time of their lives, the so-called "years of discretion," arrives. The time generally associated with Confirmation is, perhaps, the least satisfactory of all the opening life of the boy or girl. At between thirteen and fifteen years of age their own individuality is strongly forming, and whilst it can, if rightly directed, lead on to strength, yet just at the time the physical disturbance does not make for spiritual stability. Either just before or some time after that age the boy or girl is far more amenable

to godly influence. But we choose the most difficult time, and the percentages of loss are, in consequence, unnecessarily high. And how do we deal with the young fledglings who are about to leave the nest? We give them a certain amount of leading and training. We "prepare them for confirmation." Doubtless the work is conscientiously done and the equipment is, so far as it goes, fairly good. There is much prayer, much effort, much examination, and the net result is very small. The total number of the confirmed makes very little difference in the acts of communion for the year. In other words, the new recruits do not fill up the gap made by those who have ceased their regular religious life. This appalling loss of power is the weakest point in the Church's life to-day.

When we inquire into the cause of the failure we find that it is due to overmuch thought before Confirmation and far too little after. Before Confirmation we have the young, interested and plastic mind, that readily absorbs our ideas and in its natural affection attracts one's interest. During the time of preparation we are aided by simply hundreds of courses of lessons, compiled by others, which make our task comparatively easy. Also there are innumerable little booklets that we can give to the young confirmer which all make the crisis appear real and the new resolve genuine.

Then the confirmation and the first communion. And what after? The classes have ceased; the personal touch has gone; the sense of living, corporate life is weakened, and the boy or girl—or, for the matter of that, the one older in years though still young in the faith—feels that he is left to fend for himself. He has his own battle to fight and insufficient weapons or munitions to gain the victory. I do not say that this is avoidable, or that in special isolated cases this particular time of danger is not provided for. I only give the average experience of the average confirmer.

What is the remedy? It is twofold. The newly confirmed must be dealt with as from the standpoint of Confirmation and—only gradually—from that of a communicant.

First then as confirmeres, they have been trained by their own specially appointed pastor. He knows their weakness and their strength. They have learnt to trust and confide in him. Why does he leave them there? There, surely, is the best reason why, in every possible way, the old confidence should continue that the new difficulties and temptations may be faced and overcome. But

in our large parishes other pressing duties demand time and attention and the newly confirmed are left to feel after, and we hope, find the new corporate life within the communicant body. It surely should be made easier. Continuation classes on the lines of the study circles are very often possible. Not weekly, perhaps, but at least once a month. By this means much that has been hurriedly considered before confirmation can be more perfectly imparted. The construction and the meaning of the Central Service can be fully explained and understood. These younger members of the Church may feel that they are still befriended and that the Confirmation has not been simply a drive to round up, and brand, the baptized because they have attained to "years of discretion"; but rather that they have entered upon a new phase of a glorious life of victory.

Even then many will slip through the meshes of the net. But the weeks and months slip quickly by and soon will come the anniversary of the confirmation. Then occurs an opportunity that is comparatively seldom used. We are accustomed to mark the birthday, or the baptismal day, with a reminder of some sort. Can we not do this a year, and in succeeding years, after confirmation? The fact that the one who has prepared and presented them for confirmation remembers them and their needs on this recurring date serves to bring many back to the past resolve and the present failure. It means an awakening and, by God's grace, often a renewing of the old determination. Experience has proved its value. Many and many a letter have I had from those to whom I have sent an annual confirmation letter expressing gratitude for the thought that prompted the letter and asking for prayers for the future. Some who had ceased not only to communicate but all religious habits, have taken them up again and have been rescued from a godless life in which confirmation has appeared to be a mistake.

This reminder means work and watchfulness that the addresses may not be lost. But it is well worth all the trouble and at least removes the feeling that after having brought them to confirmation the Church cares very little what becomes of them.

Another method that is worth considering and could be utilized in conjunction with the annual letter on the actual day of confirmation is an old confirmees' gathering. It is done in some parishes and experience proves its value. Every year in my old parish of St. George's, Birmingham, such a gathering is arranged on the

Saturday before Trinity Sunday, and on the Sunday itself all whose addresses are obtainable are invited to communicate at one of the celebrations of the Holy Communion. From miles round old confirmees gather in the church they love and renew the confirmation vow. This has been done regularly since somewhere about 1864, and many have never missed attending for twenty and thirty years. Others, separated by half the globe, write and thank those who send the invitation, and are joined in spirit with the band of some three to five hundred who are gathered in the old church.

The one thing we need is to make confirmation a real and remembered crisis in the lives of those whom we present. At present it is largely a farce.

Just one other suggestion. Why does not some one write a small booklet for the young confirmee a year after the event? A strong, firm and yet loving message that can be bought for sixpence and presented to those who have gone through the perils of the first year, would be a boon not only to the parish priests, but to those godparents who have taken their duties seriously.

This is not enough. The regular and earnest communicant demands more attention than he receives. Some of us were very anxious that the franchise for the National Church should be that of the communicant, and yet we do very little for the spiritual life of those who have attained to that position of privilege. We have our communicant roll and mark it carefully, but the process is only one of counting heads. Very little more is done. As a rule Communicants' Guilds or Unions are paper organisations. Only a small number of communicants join them, because they derive no benefit from them. A quarterly or monthly gathering does not appeal, because it leads nowhere and the sense of fellowship is not cultivated.

Two things are of essential importance. First, the life of devotion, and secondly, the habit of study.

Speaking generally, I suppose we should say that the weekly communion is the normal for the clergy and the ideal for the laity. The spiritual life is starved by infrequency of reception of the blessed sacrament, and no amount of non-communicating attendance will compensate for the failure regularly and frequently to partake at the Holy Board. This is the first essential for the devotional life, but as it is more generally recognized than other phases we simply note its paramount importance.

But what of the daily devotional exercises? What of our own habits in this direction? How much time do we give to prayer? And if we deplore our own failures in this respect can we wonder at the failure of the flock committed to our care? What kind of prayers ascend to the Father from our people? Usually not more than two or three minutes are given, and they are utilised by time-worn supplications that mean very little because they are thoughtlessly uttered. The daily prayers need to be thought about, and our Church has provided the matter in the Collect for the week. These are much too often associated only with the Church's services and far too seldom made the basis of daily prayer. If we could get all our people to say the Collect for the day, each day, much would be done, for at some time or another they would surely think of their meaning. There is no better means for making private prayer more real than the study of the collects as aids to devotion. But also our people need and welcome anything that will help them to feel the reality of prayer. A suggested cycle of intercession is valuable for the better educated, and brief suggestions for each day of the week have often helped to lift prayer from the region of vain repetition. This means trouble and pains, but it is well worth while. If only we can instil habits of real devotion, we shall be tending and blessing those whom Christ gave to the Church to nurse for Him.

There remains the habit of study—Bible study I mean. Critical examination of the text; [scholarly exegesis are most necessary. The Holy Scriptures carefully studied mean the deepening of spiritual power and clearness of spiritual vision. But I want to urge the necessity of Bible study on Church lines for the uplifting of the soul.

The daily services are filled with the message of Holy Scripture. They are too full for the ordinary churchman. He has not time to read 120 verses of lessons and 30 to 50 verses of psalms. The table of lessons, whether in the revised or authorized calendars, are not for busy people. But there is always a message for every devout person in the daily reading of Holy Scripture. So few attempt to find the treasure because the matter is superabundant. And yet it is important both that our people should read and that they should not in their reading lose touch with their Church. A short portion of eight, ten or a dozen verses with an equally—or more—brief exposition can be read and its message understood in four or five

minutes. Such a message read each morning will provide food for prayer and thought throughout the day. Again it needs thought and the careful suggestion and help of the clergy to whom the flock in the parish is committed. There are schemes of Bible study arranged on Church principles to help in this most desirable form of corporate Church life. Of course I should myself recommend the courses of study on Church lines that are arranged by the Churchman's Union for Bible Study and Prayer, with which I have been connected from its commencement about twelve years ago. All particulars can be obtained by writing to the Secretary of the Union, Church House, Westminster, S.W.1.

I could easily show how this idea could be developed, but I hope I have sufficiently indicated the lines upon which the training after confirmation should be conducted. What is so often lost is the sense of corporate Church life. If only that could be developed we should have far less lamentation over lapsed communicants and we should feel far more satisfied that those for whom our blessed Lord gave His own life-blood are not lost by the carelessness of the Church, whose duty it is to feed His sheep and lambs, and keep them within the fold.

ARCHDEACON JOYNT'S BOOK.

GOALS AND SYMBOLS. By the Ven. R. C. Joynt, M.A., Archdeacon of Kingston-on-Thames. London: S.P.C.K., 3s. 6d. net.

Here are forty short addresses or chapters divided between goals and symbols. Of the former we have repentance, faith, obedience, prayer, etc., among the goals indicated—"accessible enough if we take and follow the path which leads to them"—while the secret of attainment is revealed by the symbols, the Redeemer, the Master, the Physician, the Potter, the Gardener, the Vine, etc. Printing to-day is costly, time is precious and elaborate theological treatises are ruled out, but Archdeacon Joynt has packed into these pages, with no unnecessary verbiage, a large amount of suggestive matter. For devotional reading nothing could be better and preachers, young and old, will do well to look through these pregnant pages to see how much can be got into a small compass since the demand of the time is for short discourses.

