

## Students and the Church.

**P**UNCH, it is well known, was never as good as it used to be.

And Dr. Clifford has recently been pointing out that the cry of the failure of the Churches is no new thing. Whether or not the Churches have really lost ground in their influence upon the national life in the last hundred or fifty years would be an interesting and not unprofitable subject to discuss. But however that may be, it will hardly be disputed that there is to-day a widespread alienation of young people from the Churches. Though definite figures might be hard to give, only a small proportion even of those who pass through our Sunday schools remain in any effective touch with organised religion in later years. And among those who are outside the Churches are not a few who are sincerely devoted to Jesus Christ and care intensely for His Kingdom.

A few years ago we were all "criticising the churches," and parsons were not behindhand in taking their share. To-day, however, there seems to be rather a tendency to self-congratulation again, and references from the platform to ministers who "foul their own nests" by criticising the churches are received with applause. No doubt much recent criticism has been unfair, but surely the way to meet criticism is not simply to get tired of listening to it, but to try to understand its causes and to remove them—so far as the criticism is valid. I believe the tide of organised religion is turning, that we are witnessing now what Neville Talbot has called "the returning tide of faith," and no longer hearing only "the melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of "Dover Beach." I believe the case for the Christian Church in history and in the present is far stronger than is commonly allowed, and that to-day there are signs of a genuine awakening in its life, far more profound than mere revivalism. But whitewash is a poor expedient for strengthening a wall that needs repairs, and there is much to be done before we in the churches are at all adequately meeting the needs of to-day.

My convictions both as to the strength of the case for the Church, and as to the validity of much current criticism have been powerfully reinforced by my experiences during the

last two years. For some time the Student Christian Movement has been growingly concerned at the attitude of students to the Churches, and the reluctance or refusal of many of the best men to enter the ministry. Successive student generations in the Movement have been troubled on this score for the last fifteen or twenty years. In 1913 the S.C.M. set on foot an inquiry in Scotland, but the war put a stop to it before anything definite emerged. Since the war the same issues have arisen, and the General Committee of the Movement appointed in September 1921 a commission, whose terms of reference, broadly speaking, were to investigate the attitude of students to the Church, and to advise as to the future policy of the Movement in this matter. The commission was composed of twenty men and women, graduates of as many different colleges, and representative of various denominations. All had been in close contact with student opinion since graduation, as Student Movement secretaries and in other ways, for periods ranging from two to twenty-five years. The commission met five times for long sessions. To supplement its own knowledge of the situation it issued questionnaires to secure further evidence, to which replies were received from 130 individuals or groups all over the college field. The commission further had the great advantage of the advice of a number of ministers and laymen and women of several denominations. Their report has now been published under the title of *Students and the Church* (S.C.M., 1/6).

The arrogance of the young is proverbial. "I wish I felt as sure of anything as that young man is of everything," remarked a professor after meeting one of his students. And it is a famous saying that "we are none of us infallible, not even the youngest." It is not for me, as one of the commission, to decide how far we have avoided an irritating dogmatism. But I can claim that the report is an honest attempt at diagnosis, inspired by a genuine desire to be constructive and not merely critical. It is largely concerned with a consideration of the attitude of students, concerning which as a body I think we may claim to be well informed. Much of it consists of arguments and recommendations addressed to the student body. But we were obliged to go beyond this and not only to indicate how far student criticism of the Churches seemed to us to be justified, but also to offer suggestions to the responsible leaders of the Churches as to how the situation in our judgment might be met. We are acutely aware of the shortcomings of the report, but it deals with a subject of vital importance to the future of the Church, and we venture to claim that it should be seriously considered.

No one outside the colleges believes that the student is "the measure of all things," but no one who is likely to read this article will require convincing of the importance of the student class. But not only are students important in themselves, I believe that they differ from other young people chiefly in being somewhat more articulate, and that their difficulties and needs are much the same. I fancy that, with little alteration, the report might have been entitled "Young People and the Church."

The report is a document of 120 pages, and all I can hope to do in a short article is to outline its contents and to emphasise some of its main conclusions, in the hope that I may whet the appetite of the readers of this for the report itself. It should be explained, perhaps, that though much that is said would apply to other parts of the British Isles, the commission has confined its attention almost entirely to the situation in England. Not only does that situation differ in many important respects from that in Scotland, Wales, or Ireland, it also presents a condition of greater urgency and difficulty.

In an appendix is printed a summary of the answers to the questionnaires mentioned above, and it might be well for many readers of the report to read that first, as providing a background for its recommendations; but there is not space here to deal with it. The main lines should indeed be apparent implicitly in what follows.

A good deal of the difficulty is due to the lack of any clear idea in the minds of students as to the nature and function of the Church. The idea of the Church does not offer challenge and inspiration: it "does not stand as the champion of any large constructive social ideal. . . . To their untried enthusiasms and idealisms the Church seems rather to be giving a tame and slavish obedience to the standards of the past, than to be grappling heroically with the problems of the present and the future. With the world's social need for background its divisions seem to betoken blindness or indifference to what is most urgent and vital in the life of the day, whilst many of their disagreements seem to be due rather to narrowness and pedantry of mind than to strength of principle. The idea of the Church as a glorious thing is lost in the ingloriousness of the denominations."\* However unfair that judgment may be, that is how matters seem to the students, and we can make no progress till we realize it.

The first section of the report is, therefore, an attempt to state in terms convincing to the student mind the ideal of

\*This and following quotations are from the report.

the Church, its nature, and purpose. It is argued that one reason for the apparent failure of the Church is just the very bigness of its aim, "for it is working deep down to undermine and do away with those hidden sources of tragedy and trouble which lie in the human spirit, and which no other body on earth attempts or even aspires to remove."

For the realization of such an aim an organised body is necessary, though it is admitted that the expression of any idea in institutional form tends at the same time to obscure and cramp it. "The Church throughout history has been about the work of bringing human life in all its phases into harmony with the Christian ideal of universal love. And in this task it has been governed by two great and often conflicting—but not finally conflicting—necessities: the necessity of giving definite shape and embodiment to its ideas, beliefs, and activities, and the necessity of allowing for growth through free and autonomous response to the requirements of successive phases of its life in communion with the Spirit of God." Here there has been a great historic line of cleavage in the Church, and an attempt is made to outline the point of view of those who have held chiefly by "the ideal of freedom" and those who have held by "the ideal of order." These two complementary ideals have never yet found adequate expression in unity. The Catholic Church is "an unrealized goal"; its complete expression is "still ahead of the confused incompleteness of all the visible organizations."

Since then no denomination completely realizes the ideal, the Commission, while urging attachment to the organised life of the Church, and giving definite advice regarding it, recognizes that students "will be bound to measure the loyalty due from them to any part of the Church according to its practical devotion to the ideal of the Kingdom, its recognition of the claim of fidelity to truth, its readiness to live in fellowship with any parts of the Church which are outside itself."

The report then turns to consider in further detail "the way the Church functions or might function in the matter of worship, service, and teaching." A comparatively lengthy section deals with the worship of the Church, and the difficulties of students both in practice and theory in giving "their sincere and intelligent co-operation," and offers recommendations both to the students and to the Churches in meeting the situation. But the next section on "The Thought of the Church," and its teaching function is, perhaps, of even greater importance, and deserves rather fuller comment here. The amount of sheer misunderstanding of Christianity in the colleges is enormous. In the case of most of the students,

it is not that they have looked at Christianity and deliberately rejected it, through indifference or wickedness or conviction that it is false. They have never really seen it. One of the most profound remarks in the report of the Army and Religion Enquiry was that "if we believed Christianity to be what they think it, we should not be Christians either." That was written of the manhood of the nation generally, and it is certainly true of students. The ignorance even of those who have been brought up in Christian homes concerning Christian doctrine and the modern attitude to the Bible is staggering.

It is a common experience after addressing an audience of students on, say, the inspiration of the Bible, to have men and women gratefully explaining how many of their difficulties have been removed, and then demanding, "Why didn't our minister tell us this?" There is no greater need to-day than for simple and straightforward expositions of the Christian faith in twentieth-century language. Students want to know what Christians believe about the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the future life, the atonement, the Bible, individual and corporate prayer, and so forth. There is too much of what Dr. George Jackson has described as "suburban preaching" in our pulpits—sermons on pretty texts and vague exhortations to be good or to "believe in Christ." More definite teaching and greater ministerial frankness is demanded, and a drastic overhauling of our educational methods. The most effective evangelism is exposition. It is no good to assume that every one knows what it means to be a Christian, and that all that is necessary is to induce men to act upon that knowledge. They do not know.

"The Church as a fellowship of service" is the title of the next section, which deals with the responsibility of Christians for "translating the values for which Christ stood into actual fact in the world's life—for aggressive and constructive thinking and experiment." "Church membership should definitely commit men and women to seek the Kingdom of God; to seek it in the life of their neighbourhood, in their business, in national and international politics."

Finally, there is a section on "Students and the Ministry of the Church." The case for a full-time ministry is outlined, and the reasons which tend to prevent the right kind of men from coming forward are discussed. Ministers are expected primarily to keep the system going, "to run the machine" with its existing agencies. There is not, men think, scope for initiative and adaptability to present needs. Students who are anxious to reach for Christianity the mass of men outside

the Church fear that to enter the ministry will make them more inaccessible to such people: they do not wish to exercise a ministry only to those already inside the walls. Many have difficulties with regard to credal tests: fortunately not an issue for us in the Baptist ministry. And there is the difficulty raised by the "very doubtful financial prospects." The training for the ministry is touched upon, and then the report closes by urging the Student Christian Movement "to become a recruiting agency for the ministry at home as it is for the service of the Kingdom abroad." This recommendation has already led to the appointment of a Recruiting Committee which is investigating this matter further with a view to action.

Such, briefly, is the scope of the report. This article is, I fear, already too long for the patience of my readers. But if anyone has persevered so far, let me close with a word of comfort. Much of this has perhaps been depressing reading, on account of subject matter and possibly also of style. But I am a confirmed optimist for the future of Christianity in England. There is a Christward movement in the colleges, not only of England, but of the world. Students are perhaps more accessible to-day to the message and the messengers of Christ than they have ever been. It is a day of boundless opportunity. Larger audiences can be secured for religious meetings in the colleges to-day than for any other purpose. It is all the more urgent that the Churches should remove needless difficulties from the way of these young men and women, and "buy up the opportunity" of leading them into the Kingdom of God.

HUGH MARTIN.

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Q, the Earliest Gospel? An elementary reconstruction by Albert Peel, M.A., Litt.D. 32 pages, 6d. Teachers and Taught.

This little pamphlet is long overdue. New Testament scholars are fairly agreed that we can identify long extracts from one of the many narratives known to Luke, containing chiefly Sayings of our Lord. Probably it was drawn up even earlier than Mark's gospel, which may have been indebted to it in places; while Luke draws freely on it, as does also the first gospel. But this knowledge has been hidden away in expensive books, and Dr. Peel thinks it well to print in a score of pages the chief passages that were the first fruits of our Lord's teaching, so that Sunday Schools may be able to enter easily into what Christian scholars have studied carefully.