

The Evangelistic Work of the Church.¹

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I. THE PRESENT-DAY CONDITIONS.

IT may be regarded in the main as a most hopeful sign that at last the Church of our land has defined the one great purpose of her existence, marked the measure of her neglect, and set herself to acknowledge her failure and amend her ways. Some of us were disappointed with what we regarded as the results of the National Mission, when the campaign in the autumn of 1916 came to a close. But the publication of the series of Reports, presented by the several committees appointed, has given us a fresh vision of the far-reaching, abiding, and attainable, possibilities of the near future.

Just as there is assurance of pardon and hope of usefulness for the soul, when in penitence it makes acknowledgment of its failure and shortcoming, so there is an earnest of near revival, and vastly increased fruitfulness, in the penitent acknowledgment made by the Church concerning opportunities given and lost, commissions bestowed and neglected, biddings spoken and disobeyed, work entrusted and left undone.

Throughout this Report, which is one of the weightiest warnings that we have received, I seem to hear a most earnest and heartfelt "Peccavi." And, because of that honest confession, I am assured of the Church's extended opportunity and increased usefulness.

The Report which we are to consider this afternoon deals with "The Evangelistic Work of the Church." That title goes to the root of things and carries us back to the first days. It reminds us of the main purpose of the Church's existence. It leads us back to the Mount of Ascension, and whispers again in our ears the parting command of the Lord Who redeemed us: "Go ye therefore and make Christians" (A.V.M.R.).

We cannot be too thankful that in an official pronouncement, made by men of all schools of thought, we have so clear and scriptural a definition of the term "evangelize," as that given on p. 18.

¹ A paper read at the Southwark Evangelical Conference on October 17:

“ To evangelize is to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church.”

The section of the programme which has been entrusted to me is “ The Present-day Conditions of the Evangelistic Work of the Church;” and I will ask you to allow your thoughts to travel in two directions. First let us look at the Church herself, and then let us look out upon the world at large. From that double consideration a plain and emphatic duty will be seen to emerge.

I. What are the present-day conditions in the Church? Here again it will be necessary to consider the Church as a whole, and then ourselves as individual members of it.

(a). In the corporate life of the Church there are discernible sad faults and blemishes. The Report before us lays these bare, and declares them to be grievous hindrances to the Church’s great work of evangelization.

(1) There is unreality in the corporate life of the Church. “ Students,” we read on p. 39—and we may take the term to mean “ thoughtful observers ”—“ Students declare that they do not get the impression, when they go to Church, that what is happening is very real to those who are taking part in it.” I imagine, for example, that they hear folk acknowledging themselves to be “ miserable sinners,” and at the same time looking very satisfied with their misery. Oh, I gravely fear the charge of unreality is a true one! My brethren of the clergy, is not the charge well founded often? Do we always minister in the sanctuary and preach the message of life as though the things we do are of supremest reality to us?

(2) There is perfunctoriness. Church-going, prayer, praise, worship, even preaching, may have degenerated into so much mere routine. The well-organized parish has so much machinery that there is a strong inclination to think of the whirling wheels (and to “ keep things going ”), while one becomes blind to the work that ought to be done.¹ The Church exists primarily to evangelize, and as a whole that is the one thing it is not doing. No one would ever think that the Master had charged His Church “ to go into all the world to make Christians,” if they, for example, studied the average

¹ Here is a terrible confession! (p. 5): “ It appears from the evidence that a parish in which men and women were being converted has been abnormal.”

gathering of clergy for ruri-decanal, archi-diaconal or diocesan purposes. I have endured much in those moribund assemblies called Ruri-Decanal Chapters, where the clergy gather at regular intervals to take solemn council together about the trivialities and non-essentials of their calling. I do not recall one such gathering in the compass of over twenty years in which there were deliberations in a real earnest spirit of concern for the salvation of souls and the evangelistic work of the Church.

(3) There is conventionality. The Church is far too "respectable." It pays far too much heed to "what people think." It is much too "proper." In preaching we are prone to use set expressions, which have lost much of the meaning they had to ourselves, and never had any meaning to numbers of our hearers. We do in our parishes much what has been done for years and generations past. We forget that changed days demand changed methods. We have rigid, set services which have little or no reality, and too seldom do we care to avail ourselves of the permissible variations.¹ In the past two generations the world has witnessed the greatest revolution in its history. I mean the great industrial revolution, peaceful (thank God) on the whole, until now. But the Church has stood still. She has not troubled to bring to bear upon the great problem of industrial change the power she possesses; she has not spoken the message she was given for such a day: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour."

To put it briefly, the Church has been dull, uninteresting, and uninterested: too comfortable with what she has to exert herself to do what she was bidden.

(b) But there is a responsibility upon the individual life. We must not lay all the blame upon the whole: it is the concern of the parts. The fault of the Church is your fault and mine. It is the fault of the laity no less than the clergy.

This Report returns again and again to one charge, viz., the lack of individual Christian witness; and a moment's honest inquiry will force from us the confession that the charge is true. We do not speak for God and witness to Christ as we should, and as we could. We shelter behind our "British reserve." We make the plausible

¹ Listen to this p. 3): "Evidence from all sides proves that our services but rarely possess the converting power which accompanies all worship which is reverent and real."

excuse that it is better to show our faith in our life than to speak in-advvisedly with our lips, and so on.

We have lost that first zeal—if some of us ever had it—that led us in the spirit of St. Andrew to bring souls to Jesus. We work side by side with others, we live under the same roof as they do, and yet we never speak a word to them upon the one thing that really matters. So far as Christ's command goes, we rule ourselves out from the obligation to "go and make Christians."

Individually, then, the average Christian is unaroused to his or her personal responsibility, reluctant to testify for Christ, lacking in real, true missionary spirit. So, whether viewed in its corporate capacity or from the point of view of the individual, the Church has fallen lamentably short of her duty. Her Master gave her a parting and pressing command. It is the one thing which she has consistently neglected!

II. What, now, are the present-day conditions in the world? In one word the conditions speak of opportunities. The lifetime of most (if not all of us here) suffices to mark three distinct phases of thought in the world at large, so far as the Gospel of Christ is concerned.

Roughly speaking, some thirty to thirty-five years ago we were familiar with the blatant atheism of the Charles Bradlaugh type. That was open hostility to religion. It gave place to indifference to religion: a thing far more difficult to combat, and far more deadly in its results. There might be a God, there might be a heaven, there might be a revelation of truth: men and women were frankly indifferent and uninterested. Well, in the last few years (and especially since the war began) we have witnessed a new and, I venture to describe it as a much more hopeful condition of affairs. The spiritual is not denied, it is not even set idly aside. It is sought for. It is emphasized in unexpected quarters. Men's hearts are hungry; men's eyes have been opened; men's thoughts have received an upward turn. Verily "many prophets and righteous men have desired to see these things which we see, and have not seen them."

In this connection, be it noted that the Second Appendix, which is possibly the most important section in the Report, bears accumulated evidence. That appendix is a Memorandum on Evangelistic Work from Secretaries to the Student Christian Movement. Here are three conditions which mark the present day.

(a) There is a spirit of honest inquiry. People, specially young people, are thinking, and reading, and inquiring to a degree that many do not realize. They are in earnest. Knowledge is available in all directions, and they are seeking for it with surprising keenness.

(b) There is a spirit of legitimate discontent. This precious Gospel which is for all people, and for all conditions of life, has not been presented as it should have been. "Labour" finds less of the spirit of Christ in our Church assemblies than it realizes in its trade unions and friendly societies, and it tells us so quite frankly. Philanthropists find in the New Testament the very secret of all true and enduring reform, which the Church professes to have known for ages, and has not had the courage to divulge. Students find in the Church a great deal of "dishonesty." It is pledged to believe one thing, and by its conduct it demonstrates its own unbelief. Honesty, candour, sincerity, daring, self-forgetfulness are virtues which they expect to see in the Church, and lo, they are lacking; and something else, far less lovely, is found in its place. Donald Hankey, in his *Student in Arms*, tells us something of this part of the sad truth.

(c) Beneath all this there is a spirit of intense interest. The inquiry and discontent are signs to encourage us. They testify to life. They evidence growth. No one who has sat by the bedside of the wounded soldier, or spoken frankly on some great subject to the men on parade, can have failed to realize the depth and reality of their interest in things spiritual. No one who has visited the homes of the men who are away on service and has sought to lead up from the affairs of their home-life to things of eternal consequence, can have failed to note a new intentness. Moreover, the whole life of the nation is astir with a movement which is akin to, and is even towards, the spiritual—self-sacrifice, self-denial, service, and such-like. It is for the Church to seize this undreamed-of opportunity, and use it for Christ: to take this spirit that is abroad and make it the interpreter of the self-sacrifice of the Cross, the self-denial of Christian discipleship, and the service that springs from love for Him Who died. But, it must be confessed with shame and alarm, in some directions the Church itself is the great hindrance. "The Church is not good enough" (p. 64). Among the student classes (we read on p. 64), there "are large numbers who do not go to church at all" . . .

“not because they do not like religion, but because they do not like the kind of religion they find in the churches.” And for the most part the fault is in the Church.

The whole position is summed up on page 30, where almost every sentence is golden: “This is a time of evangelistic opportunity.” “Ours is the golden age of evangelistic opportunity, yet in fact it is a time of evangelistic impotence.” “Men are not indifferent to the Christian Church to-day.” “The Church, awakened and advancing in many aspects of her life and work, is as yet asleep to her evangelistic duty to masses of our countrymen.”

It is a pitiful contrast. It is enough to make angels weep: will it make us Christians repent and give ourselves afresh to Christ’s allegiance?

Drawing to a close a paper already too long, let me emphasize what appear to me to be the salient points:—

(a) The call to deeper realization of the position. We have failed in the past, as is witnessed by the lamentable picture in “Christian England” with some 80 per cent. of her people outside the organized Christian Churches; and the yet more lamentable picture of the heathen world with 800 millions who have not yet heard the name of Jesus Christ.

(b) The call to greater daring. Four years of war have shown us what men and women will dare and do in a noble cause. But with the noblest cause of all “we have asked of men less than they were ready to give,” far less (p. 46). Let us, who are His, give more, ourselves; let us give all, and let us demand from others what we first have given and what He requires.

(c) The call to braver witness. After all, the spread of the cause of the Redeemer is normally dependent upon the witness of His adherents. He designed that it should be so. He bade those who loved Him “go and make Christians” by brave witness and by consistent life. It is here we have failed. May God pardon us; and as we cry to Him in penitence, may He give us grace in this day of wondrous opportunity.

There is a legend of the Ascending Christ that tells how, after the cloud had hidden Him from sight, He was met by Gabriel the archangel and a host from heaven. The archangel looked with awe and wonder at the wounds in the Redeemer’s hands and feet, asked the Lord concerning His sufferings, and inquired what steps

the Saviour had taken to prevent the earth from being in ignorance of all that had been done, in the years to come. "I have called and taught a little band of those who love Me and who saw it all," replied the Saviour, "and I have bidden them tell others, and pass on and on the story of My sacrifice." "But," asked the archangel, "what if they forget? Hast Thou no other plan?"

"No," replied the Redeemer, "No, if they who love Me forget to tell, I have no other plan. I am counting on them."

