

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 ADVANTAGES OF NON-CHURCHGOING.

BY THE REV. W. J. L. SHEPPARD, M.A.

THE above title is not ironical ! The non-Churchgoing referred to, however, is not that of an individual, in which, I believe, there is no advantage of any kind to the individual himself. The non-Churchgoing which has advantages is that of people generally, which is one of the outstanding marks of this generation (although this is by no means the only generation thus distinguished), and the advantages I hope to point out are not those of the should-be worshippers, but of the Church at large. Even so, I do not contend that there are no disadvantages in this lamentable habit of the neglect of public worship, nor even that the disadvantages do not outweigh the advantages, but I venture to think that there *are* advantages, and advantages which are so generally overlooked that it may be well to point them out. The constant contrast on Sundays of crowded streets and half-empty churches may be a bad thing, but it is not all bad, however much we may wish it were otherwise.

There is no doubt at all that a great deal of the present neglect of public worship has the war for its cause. The whole of those four years told against the observance of Sunday. The millions of men in our armies found that from the military point of view Sunday was no more than any other day, and gradually the hallowing of the first day of the week dropped out of mind. So far from the great mass of soldiers being made more earnest and devout by the war, as we were so constantly assured by Bishops and others who casually visited "the front" (although it was noticeable that very little of this testimony proceeded from Army Chaplains, and although it was also very disquieting to note that when these supposed suddenly converted men did come home on leave, they were rarely seen in the House of God), the real result was just the reverse. The same effect was produced on the still larger mass of war-workers of all kinds at home, who found that the sacredness of Sunday could be thrust aside at any time on the plea of "national necessity," an effect which was immensely augmented by the

unhappy blessing bestowed by ecclesiastical authorities on the plan of working in gardens and allotments on the Lord's Day in order to increase the national stores of food, one of the most lamentable proofs possible of the failure of our faith in God. In many cases the habit of public worship—especially in those of younger age, in whom it had not long taken root—failed entirely to survive the continual blows struck at it throughout those four years.

There was also another potent force which came into play among the men who went to the actual front. Thousands of them were Churchmen, confirmed, communicants, even Church workers, and yet had no real vital experience of personal religion. Then, in the trenches or on the battlefield, or amid the many insidious temptations of a soldier's life, they found that the religion which they believed they possessed was a powerless and a useless thing. In it there was no shelter from the power of evil, no strength or comfort in the hour when an almost certain death was being faced. Prayer had no reality in these new circumstances, and the Bible brought no message of cheer. The real fact was, that in numberless cases merely formal religion was brought to its trial and, as it always will, failed hopelessly. What more natural, or rather inevitable, that the man should feel he had no further use for a religion of this sort, and, in his ignorance of the real truth as it is in Christ, put the sham with which he had hitherto been contented out of his life altogether. The "Padre" would very seldom get the opportunity of ascertaining such a man's real need, nor would he, one fears, always be qualified to give the required help by pointing the soul in such difficulties from the unreal faith to the true. Splendid Chaplains undoubtedly there were in the Army, capable and earnest, and real spiritual guides to their men; all honour to them for the work they did. But not always so. I could tell of a School for Chaplains at which, of a dozen men present at one time, only two had any real faith in the Atonement, the rest considering it a lamentable tragedy which might well have been avoided. Nor could one, with the utmost charity, consider Clergy whose time was largely spent in dancing, drinking, smoking and card-playing as spiritual leaders. It would at any rate be hopeless to expect men of this stamp to save the faith of others from being shattered.

The number of those who eight years ago attended Church regularly, but who were merely formalists at heart, has therefore

very largely diminished, although by no means disappeared as yet. But, however much this may mean loss to the individual, it is certainly an advantage to the Church as a whole. Every merely nominal professor of religion is a weakness to the Church to which he is attached. Numbers of his friends sum up as worthless the religion which he professes, and conclude that therefore the Church to which he belongs is worthless too. But if he himself grasps the same fact and ceases to profess what in his case is a sham, true religion is all the stronger for his disappearance. Our Lord's own words to the Church which professed exactly this kind of formal religion, self-satisfied yet self-deceived, are conclusive as to this point, since He Himself frankly declares that He would rather have the coldness of entire neglect than the lukewarmness of a merely formal profession (Rev. iii. 15), while the following verse indicates His absolute abhorrence of unreality cloaked by such profession, and declares His intention to sever such from His Church and Himself.

Churchgoing as a matter of form—as a kind of amiable custom continued in deference to an effete superstition—is rapidly dying out. The Church is bound to be all the stronger and better for it. The greater the proportion of really spiritually-minded people in a congregation as compared to the number of the formalists, who act as a continual dead-weight on the Church's life and work, and cumber her progress at every step, the more keen and earnest will the Church, as a whole, become. In the days of the Neronian persecution, when to be caught at worship in the Catacombs meant certain death, there were no triflers in the congregation, and therefore the pulse of the Church's life beat so high that, despite the martyrdoms, she increased by leaps and bounds. Churchgoing has so far only reached the stage of unpopularity, but the more it approaches to that of persecution, the better for the Church. In other words, the exchange of quantity for quality is always, in the long run, of inestimable value. When, if ever, the mere fact of attending public worship means inevitable and open opposition, ridicule, injury and loss to the worshipper, our churches may only have small congregations, but the spiritual character of Churchmen and Churchwomen will be such that the re-evangelization of England may come within measurable distance.

But there are other causes than the loosening of sacred links

by the war which help to account for the lessening of the worshippers of God, and very distinct and definite will be the advantages which will accrue to the Church if she recognizes that she herself has contributed in no small measure to the present habit of non-Churchgoing.

In how many hundreds of churches have not the Clergy refused to recognize the existence of nominal Christians, at any rate as being present at public worship, and have therefore framed their teaching on the assumption that all their hearers were really and truly Christian men and women by virtue of their Baptism, until their hearers came to believe it as well as themselves. Thousands of souls who have no personal knowledge of God through Christ at all, who have never sought and found the forgiveness of sins, who have never been brought into living touch with the Saviour, Sunday after Sunday have been treated as being in a position with which they were entirely unacquainted, and have been constantly taught from that hopelessly mistaken standpoint. Excellent teaching has been given, no doubt, on habits of Prayer, and devotion, while the conditions of communicating have been dinned into the ears of worshippers without cessation, even if it were not taught in many cases that to receive the Holy Communion was all that was necessary to salvation (founded on some mistaken exegesis of St. John vi.), whereas what these souls needed first of all and above all else was to be pointed to Christ as a personal Saviour and to be brought to an actual act of acceptance of Him. Fatal, indeed, in the history of multitudes of souls has been this extraordinary process of "the cart before the horse." It will be truly an enormous gain to the Church if its teachers are eventually driven to see the mistakenness of the standpoint thus adopted, and to proceed on the far wiser assumption that, with regard to the spiritual position of many in our congregations, we cannot afford to take anything for granted.

The same mistake has caused the Church in countless instances absolutely to throw away the tremendous opportunity placed in the hands of the Clergy by the preparation for Confirmation. Nothing could be plainer than the teaching of the Church through her formularies that, at his or her coming to years of discretion, the baptized person is to be urged to make and publicly declare the personal acceptance of Christ, exactly as if he or she were now coming forward for Baptism itself as an adult. Yet how few

Confirmees ever have the plain way of salvation put before them, or have explained to them what Decision for Christ means, or are taught that this is actually essential for true Confirmation. Instead of that, explicit and laborious instructions are given them in religious habits, leaving their hearts entirely untouched; the result being that they go through Confirmation merely as a form—impressive, no doubt, but still a form—and so pass into the ranks of the nominally Christian communicant, or, more frequently, non-communicant. I well remember a discussion at a gathering of Clergy in which I ventured to press home the importance of our being assured of the conversion of our Candidates before presenting them for Confirmation, and how a venerable and famous Evangelical leader who was present declared that he considered such a condition quite unnecessary; “so long,” he said, “as they are decent and well behaved young people, and their moral character is good, I do not think anything more is required.” A girl of fifteen some while ago had been prepared for Confirmation by the Clergy of a neighbouring Church which she attended before she came to us, and as within quite a little while after her Confirmation she professed, and I believe truly, to decide for Christ, I asked her whether in her Confirmation preparation anything had been said to her about this, or any explanation given of the way of salvation, to which she replied, “No, nothing!” If the tremendous falling away in Church attendance drives it home to the Clergy that they are failing very largely to use the Confirmation opportunity aright, or that the preparation of the Candidates needs to be on much more definite lines, so that the personal conversion to God becomes the essential of presentation, then, despite the fact that many still will slip through the net, it will be an enormous advantage to the Church.

But there are advantages to the Church which may lie hidden deeper beneath the non-Churchgoing of the day, if she only has eyes to perceive them and wisdom to turn them to account. This modern symptom of more or less indifference to what is termed—not very happily, perhaps—“organized religion,” may well prove to be the pointing finger directed to aims and methods of the Church which are wrong, and which God would have her recognize as such.

For instance, in how many cases has not the Church been perfectly contented with Churchgoing as the result of her ministry? So long as the Church was full, the Parochial organizations flourish-

ing, the Communicants numerous at Easter, and the annual balance-sheet satisfactory, how often has not all this contented both Clergy and people. And yet there may have been no record in the history of the past year (or, often, years) of any definite case of true conversion to God, no instance of a worldly-minded person gladly sacrificing doubtful interests and pleasures for Christ, no offer from anyone for service in the Mission field abroad. Allowing for numerous exceptions, yet the Church as a whole has been satisfied with Churchgoing as the result of her work, and now that this is so quickly diminishing it may well be God's warning to her that her aim was wrong, and His call to direct her whole efforts towards more spiritual and more abiding results than this. Nor is the reminder unneeded that the secret of re-establishing Churchgoing or any religious observance, lies in the winning of souls for Christ. At a Mission some years ago the Incumbent put before the Missioners the desire of the Parochial Clergy that the Mission should produce more Communicants; the answer was that, if a number of conversions took place, the result mentioned would follow naturally enough. And so it proved. The Missioners scarcely mentioned Confirmation, but the number of souls brought to Christ during the Mission ensured a succeeding Confirmation which the Bishop of the Diocese described as the most remarkable he had ever seen. And it is on these lines, and these lines only, that Churchgoing can be reliably re-established. Who can gauge the advantages if the present difficulty teaches the Church this lesson?

Or again, the present distress may point equally clearly to wrong methods of work. It is certainly significant that the same period which is marked by the decrease in Churchgoing is equally marked by the Church's imitation of the world around her, and her endeavour to win people by providing the world's amusements within her own boundaries. During the last five years scores of Parishes have adopted the cry that, despite the clear statements of our Lord and His Apostles, the Church must be broad and not narrow, that friendship with the world is quite compatible with friendship with God, that Christians were never meant to be "not of the world," and that the right attitude of the Church to the world is not separation but fellowship. Accordingly, in numbers of Parishes the Church has become feverishly active in organizing and promoting Parochial theatricals, dances, and whist drives, apparently believing

that these methods would prove avenues to public worship and furnish the adequate material for the building up of spiritual character. It is striking indeed that this same period of the adoption of worldly methods by the Church should have, as one of its outstanding features, the departure of the people from the Services of the Church. Could anything show much more plainly that the method is hopelessly wrong? And not only so, but experience has again and again disclosed the fact that along this line of work lies untold spiritual disaster. When the failure and the peril of these methods is understood, and they are finally thrown aside, who can estimate the advantage to the Church?

Space forbids the discussion of how far the lack of Churchgoing is a distinct proof of the mistake of the looseness of doctrine and depreciation of Scripture which is the mark of so much present-day teaching and preaching; or how far this same diminution of worshippers points to the urgent necessity of Unity between the various Branches of the Church of Christ in our land. But there is one other aspect of the question which cannot be omitted, that aspect set forth with such trenchant power in a pamphlet from the pen of the Rev. W. E. S. Holland some years ago. Mr. Holland argued, and incontrovertibly so to many minds, that the success of the work of the Church in England depended upon God's blessing being vouchsafed to her efforts, and that such blessing could not be expected unless the work were in accordance with His revealed Will. The real reason then, he concluded, for the failure at home lay in the totally inadequate contributions of men and money which were forthcoming for the work of the Church overseas. There is no doubt that this is absolutely true. One great cause of our rapidly emptying churches at home will be found in the great masses of people in Africa and Asia who have never yet been adequately evangelized, and many of whom have never yet heard the Gospel at all. If empty churches drove the Church to the conviction that "there is that scattereth and yet increaseth," and filled her afresh with the missionary energy and enthusiasm of the Early Church, so that she began to give of her very best for the work overseas, this would perhaps prove in the long run to be the greatest of all the advantages of non-Churchgoing.

W. J. L. SHEPPARD.