

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

HOW MUST THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND ADAPT ITSELF TO BE THE MEANS OF EXPRESSING ITS MESSAGE ?

BY A. G. PITE, ESQ., M.A., M.C., Head of Cambridge House.

I HAVE taken this title, whether rightly or not, to refer primarily to organization. The Church of England is among other things an organization, and it is of the adaptation of its machinery to the conditions of the future that I wish to speak. When you have got a message it is a matter of supreme importance that you should find the best vehicle for its delivery, and the greater and more vital the message, the more cause is there for perfecting the working of its ministry.

I would begin, however, with two cautions. First, it is necessary for the purpose of consideration and discussion to isolate the matter of organization and to treat it to a certain degree abstractly ; but of course here, as everywhere, the quality of personality in the people concerned is of primary importance, and you must remember that I assume throughout that this fact is allowed for.

The second caution is that I am quite frankly going to make some suggestions that are in the rawest state. If there is anything in them at all, which is doubtful, a great deal of hard work and experiment will be needed in working them out and making them practicable. My reason for putting them forward at all is that I believe Christianity calls for heroic measures and never more so than in England to-day. Conventional thinking has always been the chief enemy of Christ, from His own day till now. If we are to regain the vigour of the Early Church or of the days of the Reformation, we must attempt the boldness and originality of the apostles and reformers. This does not mean that the ideas in this paper are necessarily either bold or original, but that unless there is this element in our thinking and in our discussion about the future of the Church of England, we shall probably waste our time.

The matter then to which we must give our first attention is the parochial system. It is by far the most important feature in our organization. Nearly all the work of the Church is done through it, and on this foundation the superstructure of deaneries, archdeaconries and dioceses is built. Now this system has just happened. It is not the result of bold and original thinking, at any rate to-day ; and at the least we should carefully review it. No reform that accepts it as it is, is likely to have very far-reaching effects. Yet clearly it is far too large a part of the whole to be treated casually. Neglect it and you achieve little, disturb it and you run the risk of ruin.

The first thing to be noted about the parish is that it is essentially a rural idea and came into being in a settled agricultural

community. It is not a missionary unit. It is not particularly suited to study, devotion or philanthropy. Other bodies have always sprung up to deal with these parts of the Church's duty. But even taking it as it is, a simple arrangement of the members of the Church into manageable groups, it is clearly much more natural and real in the country than the town. Taking Church history as a whole, there have always been in cities where the Church has been alive, other loyalties and groupings more natural and living than the parish, from the Church in Cæsar's household, to the Guilds, the Independents, and the Salvation Army.

There are probably many reasons for this, but two seem of particular significance. In the country the minister can know the whole life of his people, and the Church can be the natural centre for the village. In city life the minister cannot come into understanding contact with the daily life of the bulk of his parishioners, and the Church has no natural, geographical or social area of which it is the centre, but only an arbitrary ecclesiastical district. To make this point still clearer, in a village the clergyman has an equal opportunity of meeting and knowing the problems of all his parishioners, in a city he can know well the mothers, children and shopkeepers, but how can he really understand and serve those in industry, the clerks, and all who spend their working life in places perhaps miles away!

In consequence of this lack of relation between the structure of the Church and the structure of society in a modern city, we have created a vicious circle. The parochial system suits the women and children, therefore women's and children's work flourishes, therefore more of the time of the clergy is taken up with such work, therefore the clergy tend more and more to be people who are attracted by such work (whether they realize it or not), and so the ordinary life of men tends to be increasingly neglected by the Church and unprovided for by its organization. The same blight has very largely descended on the Free Churches, for their local congregational system suffers from the same disadvantages.

The exceptions to this general condition are instructive. You will have noticed that a number of the abler and more original clergy tend to take churches that are rather less tied to a parish; and in some ways they make the situation worse by drawing men from other parishes. Their freedom from parochial ties enables them to make special provision for special groups. St. Martin's-in-the-Fields is an obvious example. But other instances can be found in every city and most large towns. Then there are the various societies planned to meet specific problems, like the Church Army, the London City Mission, the Diocesan Evangelistic Councils, the Stock Exchange Christian Union, etc., and among the Free Churches such experiments as the Wesleyan Central Halls. All these are attempts to complete the work of the Church by adding bodies and activities to make up for the deficiencies of a purely local organization.

This way of meeting the problem is bound to lead, as in fact it has done, to a great deal of waste, inefficiency and overlapping. The attention is diverted from a clear duty, to choosing which body you have time to use or to help. The whole activity of the Church in a district becomes scrappy and haphazard. Some of these extra bodies will be strongly supported, others will not be working at all. One parish will have close touch with relief and rescue work, another with open-air meetings, another with Sunday School Reform. A thousand agencies press their attention on the harassed parish, all good and all unrelated, and the luckless parson is left to work out a policy which must inevitably exclude the majority of these interests, and all the time he has the sole responsibility for the Christian work in his parish. Mercifully the law of averages saves us from complete failure. In most boroughs there is at least one Church which is enthusiastic for each of these main interests. But the confusion is pitiful when looked at from a detached point of view. It is nineteenth century individualism run riot. Complete uniformity would, it is true, be even worse. But a moderate efficiency is not sin, and whether we care for the preaching of the Gospel, foreign missions, teaching, or works of mercy, it is depressing to realize the amount of energy wasted in having to work for them through our present parochial system. In every department it means that the enthusiast is overworked, the ordinary clergy worried and bothered in direct proportion to the efficiency of the society concerned, and after all much available Christian power is left unmobilized, and whole areas of life left untouched.

To use a military simile, the staff work is almost non-existent. Our task to-day is to create an army, not, it is true, from a rabble, but from a mass of small groups of volunteers marching rather aimlessly across country harassed by orderlies and A.D.C.'s who come from a variety of unrelated superior officers and auxiliary troops, while the platoon commanders are expected to be experts on strategy, tactics, supplies, casualties, reinforcements, communications and information. Such a posse may perform prodigies of valour and endurance, but it is hardly to be wondered at if it fails to occupy a country and leaves large bodies of the enemy on its flanks and rear.

What is to be done about it? The first thing is to see if there is some simple analysis of the situation. As I see it, the outstanding fact is the sharp division to-day between a man's home and his work. The bulk of the work of this country to-day is done not individually as before the Industrial Revolution, but in large and small groups. The Limited Liability Company is the most typical unit of our Society, with its corresponding Trades Union. A working man to-day leads a double life. His home life is individual, the place for leisure and hobbies. His working life has quite another set of loyalties and temptations. It takes up the bulk of his time and energy and binds him to itself more and more through sport, welfare work, trades union politics, and all the force of participation in a common life. As things are the Church only

comes to him as an individual and demands a portion of his leisure. The first adjustment we ought to attempt is to give at least equal attention to him at work, and to try to provide for him there. Then there still remains the problem of the better adapting of our means to deal with home and locality life.

If then this analysis is sound, suggestion and experiment are needed for relating the Church more closely to industry and business generally. There seem to be at least three possible lines of work. First, there is an obvious need for the building up of fellowships of Christians within a factory, office, mine or works. In the case of larger organizations or whole industries, these might grow up into a tremendous force for good. We might see "the Church that is in the Crewe works" and the Federation of Railwaymen's Christian Unions. The amount of help and strength that such bodies would bring their members would be greater than that of many Sunday Brotherhoods or meetings. The strongest enemy, we all know it, of most men is solitude, and the weakness that springs from it. It should be quite unnecessary to ask a young man to stand alone against the public opinion of the place in which he works. It is a terrible thing to face week after week a body of people in some ways better men than you are, but whose habits of speech, whose stories, gambling or morality you cannot approve. The temptation to sink to their level is tremendous. The alternative for all except the strongest is a priggish or a miserable isolation. But a man is hardly ever alone. There are others like himself, if only he could find them. Together they might change the whole life of their works, at the least they could bear one another's burdens—to many men to-day the greatest burdens of their Christian life.

Such fellowships do already exist here and there. It ought to be the joy of the Church to foster and create them. Surely it is supremely the opportunity for Evangelicals who believe that it is their first duty to reach "the other man," and who are mercifully free from denominational difficulties. It seems to me that unless we help in some such way as this the "little children in Christ" to strengthen one another in the actual life they are called upon to live, it is hypocritical to appeal to them from the security of another kind of life to stand firm. We speak of the evils of modern Society and of the beauty of the Christian life, but can we really be satisfied with committees, councils, conferences, protests, books and exhortations, when we neglect the first step of employing the ordinary forces of our human nature, co-operation and companionship in the fight with evil?

The second step that should be taken is the preparation of the ministry for this kind of work. There are two alternatives, both of which may have their place. It may be necessary to send ordination candidates or deacons for a year or two into industry or commerce, when as working men they may help in the building up of such groups and in learning from inside the life of the working world and how they can serve it. It will however clearly be neces-

sary to have some kind of chaplaincies to individual works or groups of works. If this problem is to be tackled, some men must become specialists in it and must give a great deal of time to help in the organizing and renewing of these scattered fellowships and in the necessary business of relating them to the Home life of the Church. For if this section was entirely separate from the rest of the Church it would probably lead to further sectarianism and to another set of evils parallel to those from which we suffer at present. It seems to me that though the bulk of this work will fall on the laity, it will yet be necessary for a part of the ordained ministry to be given to it, for besides the reasons already given, it will be most important to show that the Church takes an equal interest in this; and also in our complex civilization such a movement could never develop its full power without a certain measure of intensive work.

The third line of experiment deals rather with the linking of this new industrial side to the present organization of the Church. This also can be attempted in at least two ways. In nearly all the great centres of business there are by a curious historical dispensation places of worship, originally parishes or congregational centres, but to day islands in a mass of offices or works. These churches might well be attached to specific forms of business. Churches might be specially allocated for those in insurance, for the banks, the exchanges, the Press or the Post Office. This natural provision of a centre for worship belonging to them might be of the very greatest help, and might do much to save the group from mere sociability or undue concentration on a barren ethic. But everywhere in city life there are opportunities for services for special groups. A good deal of this is already going on. But surely every church might at some time or another have services for commercial travellers, or retailers, for transport workers or clerks, where they could intercede for one another with an intimacy and reality impossible to the rest of us, and might hear the Gospel preached to meet their own need.

There is probably a great deal more to be said on that aspect of the Church of the future, but we must also consider the adaptation of the existing machinery. The problem that faces the parochial clergy can be divided into three parts according to the needs of the parishioners.

There is first the body of convinced believers, there is then a vaguer set of learners, children, adolescents, agnostics, the lazy, the undecided, and those with difficulties. And beyond these is the great mass who are to-day predominantly pagan. At present far too much of our work is expected to benefit all these classes at once.

This in a day when every one is at least partially educated is a vain hope. The Church of England Services are not designed to attract and suit people who doubt the existence of God. The language and symbol of praise and thanksgiving, of confession and communion, are of necessity beyond the grasp of the natural man. Holy Communion may be in a very real sense the central service

for the company of the faithful, it cannot and should not be a parade of worship before the sceptical or the ignorant. As things are to-day, it is folly to think that you can pluck full-grown, semi-scientifically minded pagans into the full life of the Christian Church at a jump. If ever, it can only be achieved very occasionally.

We need to recognize these three classes, and to provide for each according to his need. It is no use appealing to people to come to church. We must go out into the highways and hedges and tell them there of the King's feast. The lost sheep does not come to the fold of his own accord.

There is still far too little general effort by the Church to preach the Gospel to every creature. There are too few open-air meetings, evangelistic campaigns, and of those that there are, too many are isolated, sectional and unrelated to the general life of the Church in their neighbourhood.

But a more serious lack, I believe, is the absence of any successful provision for the learners and the doubtful. There must be found some common ground where a man can come and meet the Christian minister or layman without having to listen to the intimacies of Christian devotion or commit himself further than he honestly can. There should be far more opportunities for questions and discussion, more attempts at the study circle or tutorial class method, more Christian evidence work. But much more important than the method is the atmosphere. We should reach and hold a far larger number of our fellows if we seemed to them fair minded, sincere, friendly people, who really thought our faith had to do with life, and could stand the test of ordinary human intercourse and discussion. Any man, I believe, who succeeds in creating such an intermediate stage between the street and the Church, will have a response that we should think to-day quite impossible.

But if our evangelism, for both these classes of work are essentially that, is to be really successful, we must have congregations that are more living fellowships. Too many Churches to-day are not worth belonging to; and though this is rather outside the scope of this paper, it must be emphasized at this point. A Church is not really a Church at all if it be merely an accidental aggregate of people whose only link is geographical neighbourhood, and whose only common undertaking is a so-called service of worship. As I have already said, we cannot fulfil the law of Christ if we bear not one another's burdens. We cannot be members one of another simply through a weekly sitting together under one roof. There must be a greater demand on those who would be members of Christ's body. There is an infinite variety of ministry and function, but we cannot carry passengers who pretend to be of the crew. This must, of course, loom very large with many of you. But what surely often happens is that a member of a congregation is given far too restricted a choice. He can teach in the Sunday School, he can give money, he can attend meetings. Why should he not

be linked to some less fortunate brother? Why should he not start a discussion group or be encouraged to enter local politics? Perhaps he can study; he may know something of law, or medicine, or business. Whatever his qualifications, ways can be found of using them for the Kingdom of God. Through them he can serve some other members of his Church or his neighbourhood as a whole, and now and then he can compare notes with the others who with different gifts are serving in other ways, and then when they meet together for worship, knowing each other's loyalty and service, they can worship together in sincerity and joy, for they have abode by one another in their temptations.

Finally, it is clear that if the local Church is to be built up in this way, it is hopeless to ask of one man that he shall cater adequately for all those stages and be equally expert on all sides of life. We must have more specialization of function. We must have those who are trained and equipped for the circumference work—who know how to run an open-air meeting and the best form of mission service. Then equally we must have teachers for all ages and all needs. There is enough in Christianity to tax our greatest minds, and no trouble can be too great to make the teaching office of the Church a true vehicle of the Holy Spirit. And also it is true that however far we may have travelled along the way of Communion we still need those whose special gift it is to help us in the deepening of the spiritual life and showing us new paths in the life of devotion. From the choosing of the twelve apostles, from the sending out of the seventy, from the setting apart of the deacons, the natural and right process has always gone on of putting people to the work for which they are fitted by God Himself, and to-day probably our greatest failure is an absurd expectation that the parish clergy can one by one fulfil for their parish all its needs. We must become a team or we shall fail one by one, and the further our civilization progresses, the more complex become our cities, the more complete will be our failure.

If all this alteration in the Church of England were achieved, it would appear very different, so different that the whole scheme may seem hopelessly academic and unreal. But that is no argument against it, if it is soundly based. If these suggestions appear chimerical, so also once did America and flying. But the important thing is not the particular idea nor the detail of machinery, but the spirit of courage and the exercise of unfettered thinking.

When all is said and done, the greatest power on earth is the love of God in the heart of man, and the plea of this paper is not really for this or that reform, but for the setting free of that love in our hearts. As we look at the Church of England to-day, we see it tied and bound in large measure with the chain of its sins, bound by convention, timidity, lukewarmness, slackness of thinking, lack of co-operation. New wine must be put into new bottles, and this paper has chiefly dealt with the design and manufacture of the bottle; but the bottle, however necessary, is no good without the new wine.