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Evangelism in Modern Industrial England

BY THE REV. J. W. ROXBURGH, M.A.

I

IN the issue of *THE CHURCHMAN* for June, 1952, the Rev. M. M. Hennell gave an authoritative explanation of some of the experiments in evangelism that are being tried by certain groups in working-class areas of some of the French cities. Section IV of his article was an attempt to relate these experiments to the situation that faces us in modern industrial England. Mr. Hennell felt that while the parochial system was working well in many areas, there was room for experiment in the 'down town' parishes of our large industrial cities.

May I make a plea for an energetic rethinking of the position in regard to the approach to the 'ordinary working man'? There is no such thing as a 'typical working-class parish'—except it be in the absence of men from the Church—and so generalizations have their limitations. But in many areas the workers and the Church are growing steadily further and further apart, because the Church is failing to make the necessary adjustment in its approach due to the change in outlook of the working classes. The Church is still organized as if the working-class virtues were thrift, sobriety and diligence, whereas they now are generosity, camaraderie and loyalty to one's class. (See the quotations from Bishop Neill and Abbé Godin on p. 91 of *THE CHURCHMAN*, June 1952.)

After nearly two centuries of industrialization and democracy we have erected a system in this country whereby it is possible for any man of brains and energy and initiative to rise quickly to the fore—and to go and live in a respectable suburban area. Children of workers who live in down town areas can soon adapt themselves to new environments when they 'get on'. But the result is that in the working-class parishes there are few people who are capable of initiative, individual thinking, and leadership. The ordinary worker is suspicious of such traits. He feels that individuality is a dangerous thing. He feels a man with such leanings is liable to disturb working-class solidarity.

We have got to learn to appreciate the extent of this desire for solidarity. In many industries, men live and work in gangs. Their very existence is dependent on their fitting in with their fellows. At the docks, for instance, ships are manned in gangs of eight, and in what is often dangerous, precarious and unpleasant work the docker needs to feel confidence in (and sympathy with) the others with whom he is working. In the mines it is the same. So it is in the car industry; one Coventry firm, for instance, even goes to the lengths of paying a gang as a whole, and allowing only the gang to put on or stand off its workers. And so it is in many a factory in our land.

The worker knows too that standing together has helped him enormously to improve his lot. The united action of a strike has caused temporary hardship, but the gain in the long run has been higher pay and better conditions. And it is because he is a deflectionist from working-class solidarity that the blackleg or 'scab'—the strike breaker—is so despised and loathed. And the worker feels that if only this camaraderie can be maintained, the world will one day be at his feet.

There is also the feeling that Robert Louis Stevenson once expressed in the couplet,

' The world's so big, and I'm so sma',
I do not like it, at all, at a' '.

In the vast world of machines the individual seems to have little significance. He does not appear to matter very much, and he does not seem to be able to achieve very much. The only satisfaction he can get is by sinking his individuality in the class to which he belongs, and which he does not want to leave. The worker is profoundly affected by the atmosphere of mechanization around him—and his reaction is to stick close by his comrades.

II

To meet this situation, the Church must itself be a fellowship—be, in fact, the Church. And it is because it so very rarely is, that it is largely boycotted by working men. Feeling their need for comradeship, they get that need satisfied in the football crowd, in the pub, in the Union branch meeting, in the street, in the club—but not in Church. So often the atmosphere is forbidding in Church, and they feel they are not wanted. But above all, they do not find their 'mates' there. So they are lost. They are out of their class. They are uncomfortable.

That is why it is so vital, if the working classes are to be won to Christ, that this modern theological emphasis on the biblical idea of the Church must be translated into action in our working-class parishes. There can, of course, be no alternative to faith in Christ for individual salvation. Every man's decision must be his own. But if he can feel his oneness with his fellows both before and after his conversion the worker will begin to see where the Church has something to offer him—something that is far better than any of his material fellowships, something that gives him all the fellowship he needs with his fellow men, but gives him in addition fellowship with God.

Our approach then has to be in terms of fellowship. It is most important that we try to get whole gangs, and not individuals. It involves a different technique—a harder technique, but a newer one facing a new situation. If the gang that works together can also be brought to worship together, then something of the greatest importance in the extension of the Kingdom of God will have been achieved.

But the Church is not organized to be able effectively to make such an attempt. We find that most working-class parishes are being staffed by one parson working alone. If he is conscientious, he will spend a lot of his time with the children—both chasing them off his roof and telling them the good news of the Gospel. He will be keen

on getting the youth, and he may have many organizations to cater for them. He will find it comparatively easy to get the women to mothers' meetings and the like. And he may by such means be used to win many to Christ. But he will have next to no time left to win the men.

In middle-class parishes there are laymen capable of leadership and initiative. The running of the Church can be, therefore, very much a team affair. In working-class parishes there are teams all right—witness and prayer are not the perquisites of one class. But so much falls on the vicar in the way of leadership that the burden can be a truly devastating one. It is essential therefore that we provide a different setting in which we attempt to win the working man to Christ—unless we are prepared to break more and more clergy with impossible tasks.

Of course, the cry for curates has been going on for years, and will continue to go on for many more years. And curates will continue to go largely to established and middle-class parishes. But while more curates would be one answer, the needs of working-class areas could be much better served than they are at present if parishes could be allied much more than they are. Two neighbouring incumbents with parishes of 15,000 each could achieve far more if they were themselves a team, working their parishes as a team, than is possible under the present system. I am convinced that without any change in the parochial system as such, much more could be made of such alliances. No man can work an industrial parish singly and adequately. But two men can. And if men were not permitted to be alone in such parishes, and were forced to think through and to practice team work, available manpower as at present could go a long way to winning the workers.

III

There are difficulties, naturally, not least of which is the question of the Parson's Freehold. But they are not insuperable. The senior of the two incumbents could act as the leader, and the junior, while having his own authority in his own sphere, would be in every sense of the word a partner.

The chief practical result of this co-operation would be to save an enormous amount of time on the routine work of the parish, and so enable incumbents to devote much more of their energies to the organized labour in their areas. They would have time to meet the men, talk with them and get to know them. Above all, they would be able to get down to the job of training lay apostles. In his unregenerate state the working man is profoundly suspicious of the ordained minister. He regards him as 'paid to do a job', and, like himself, only working for what he can get out of it. The gangs can only really be penetrated for Christ by men who are themselves members of the gang—'lay apostles' they are frequently called. The parson's job is the training of these lay apostles. In many ways this becomes priority number one in industrial parishes. That is why time has got to be found for this training job at the expense of other less important things—such, even, as the Parson's Freehold.

The French movement makes a great point of emphasizing the identification of the priest with his people. I am sure we have a lot to learn from that. We ought to be living among our people. In the central area deanery of one of our large cities, there is not a single resident incumbent. How can the people capture this spirit of fellowship if the incumbent is living in a house in a pleasant district two or three miles away? He must be amongst them, sharing their problems with them. He need not necessarily agree with their general political outlook, but he must have a sympathetic understanding of it. It is worse than useless—as we ought by now to have realized—to try to win a working-class district for Christ unless there is a team attempt to win a whole community.

We sometimes hear people say we ought to abandon the 'down town' areas, as they cannot be worked properly. They certainly can not be worked by non-resident, single-handed incumbents who are tied to an archaic system, and who have predominantly middle-class outlooks. But they can be worked by teams of clergy who can identify themselves with their people, understand the spirit of togetherness, and live and preach a Gospel that transforms both lives and communities.

Industrial England is in the Christian front line. It must be won for Christ now, or the chance may not still be ours in the next generation. It is not being won. But it can be won—provided the Church will not retreat to the suburbs.

Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

REVOLT AGAINST EUROPE

IN the opening days of the twentieth century Europe enjoyed a prestige at once political, economic, military and cultural which was without precedent in the history of the world. It was confidently assumed that western civilization was the herald of innumerable blessings for the peoples of Asia and Africa, and that the dissemination of European culture all over the world was the responsibility and privilege of Western man. There were few to question this conclusion or to doubt that progress was assured if the primitive cultures of the East gave place to a civilization which was both humanist and technological. In less than two generations Europe has lost this position of world leadership and is itself threatened with political and social disintegration. Its military and economic power, so overwhelming half a century ago, has declined to such an extent that it cannot any longer control the policies of the world. The virtual partition of Europe into two rival spheres of influence under the dominance of two great non-European power systems, symbolizes the sudden and catastrophic decline of what was once the embodiment of the idea of