

## Baptists and Downtown Churches.

I WANT to assume at the outset that those who care to read this article are fairly acquainted with the facts. Twenty years of intensive study of the problem in Liverpool have given a tolerable knowledge of an intolerable situation; and the inevitable temptation is to write at large on "The Arrested Progress of the Church," with a display of terrible facts, and illustrations of many attempts to "mollify with ointment" sores that are deep seated. The Report of Liverpool's Commission of Enquiry in 1908 led to the establishment of the Free Church Centre, where I continued the enquiries and discussed them in numerous committees and with multitudes of individuals, getting my facts at first hand and exploring every possible means of finding a remedy. In London my old friend and colleague, Arthur Black, has made it clear that a situation exists if possible even more terrible than that in Liverpool; and if I write with the experience of the latter city at the back of my mind it is with the certainty that similar conditions prevail in all our large centres of population. With capable organisation, adequate investigations can be made everywhere. It does not require much organisation, and certainly *much* less in the way of brains, to criticise the investigations—every newspaper correspondent can, and does, do that; but to find a remedy is another proposition. If I dare to make the attempt, it is solely because I have the experience of one who has *tried*. Of one thing I am convinced, that it is possible, granted adequate organisation and plenty of money, to gather a crowd and create a hectic atmosphere almost anywhere—possible also when people are massed together, to induce them to do things under the stress of emotion that have an inevitable reaction. But it is doubtful whether the satisfaction of the spectacular and transient is worth the assured collapse. Furthermore, the service of the Kingdom of God by advertising "stunts," even if they are not a type of deception, is not likely to have a permanent spiritual value.

There is no doubt that the downtown areas are difficult. They tend, particularly in cities where there are large Roman Catholic, Jewish, and foreign populations, to classify themselves; for this type of people, by many cunning methods, works towards the exclusion of outside influences, and a block is formed. No wonder, for these are not usually comfortable neighbours. In

given circumstances it may be even dangerous to live amongst them. But have we no duty even there? In any case vast populations are huddled close together in these unsavoury spots; while our churches stand there, either as a witness for vital truth and righteousness or as a confession of defeat. It is true that other agencies are at work, such as the Salvation Army and unattached missions, with varying success.

Some of these areas still contain the beautiful houses where, down to fifty years ago, the leading workers and supporters of our Free Churches used to live. To-day they are slums, inhabited by multitudes whose insistent problem is how to live. Meanwhile the public houses flourish.

There are two main difficulties staring us in the face when we try to find a way out. The first is the independence of the churches concerned. Their buildings have a history, and once were crowded to the doors. When they were built the men in their pulpits were preachers of outstanding influence, and their supporters were immensely proud of their places of worship and flocked to the services. The sons and daughters of those men have moved far out and have either settled down to work in other churches of the same or different denomination (it is noteworthy how disastrously the Baptists have suffered in this way in Liverpool) or have drifted altogether away from religious influences. Some explanation is also to be found in the fact, often mentioned to me, that association with the work of downtown churches involves a sacrifice of social standing, so that young people are not likely to meet the type of husband or wife to satisfy the ambition of their parents! So we find the "faithful few," generally dispirited beyond words, clinging to the old traditions tenaciously, and resisting change. They often travel great distances, and, in addition to the cost of transport, give with extraordinary generosity, only to keep a mere preaching centre in being. They can do little aggressive work, because they lack the helpers. And they are very sensitive to outside suggestion.

The other difficulty is in the extraordinary selfishness of many of the more prosperous churches. Frankly I find it hard to understand their interpretation of their mission. Are they evangelising agencies or simply social clubs? With a substantial membership and constant accessions of strength, it is often a perfect marvel to see how many and varied are the agencies for keeping the people—particularly the young people—*there*. Even when there is a good Christian Endeavour Society—an organisation, rightly managed, of immense spiritual value—it is amazing how little encouragement is given to external evangelisation. I am not theorising in this, for I have had more opportunity than

most of contact with societies of this sort, and am conscious of the wealth of young life that is eager to be used in the service of the Kingdom. Yet to put in a plea for their help elsewhere is to receive a sharp snub for "impertinence," or the bland assurance that "they can't be spared." Treated like this they often "spare" themselves, and drift away from religion. I used to wonder in early days how my father could bear to miss from his congregation the considerable number of people who were engaged in outside work. They were his best helpers, yet he cheerfully sent them forth to evangelise the villages and growing suburbs round Oxford—building better than he knew, as present developments bear eloquent testimony. That was by no means an isolated case, and I think that no church that equipped and sent forth workers in like manner suffered in its own life.

To make constructive suggestions would be easier if it were possible to give specific instances. That cannot be done, however, for the real heroes of some of these struggling causes would conceivably be hurt, and I should never have been consulted in any case if I had been thought capable of publishing the facts far and wide. But I drafted three schemes, and in part two others, for churches of different denominations. In one I had the help of a committee and a fundamental principle that the new organisation should be built round the existing nucleus, of which I shall speak shortly, was put on one side, so that it became visionary. With one exception the others failed because of the two difficulties mentioned in previous paragraphs—chiefly the first. One only was adopted in its entirety and the denomination concerned took it up with enthusiasm, promised workers, and raised a large sum of money. But the chosen leader was seldom on the premises except on Sunday, and frequently away even then, while no effort was made by him to enrol the necessary workers. It is small wonder that under the circumstances the place was finally sold to the Roman Catholics. There is no consolation in knowing that a new church has been built in a growing suburb. What grieves me is that the old district is left without evangelical witness, and there is a huge available population sorely in need of heroic Christianity. With these instances at the back of my mind I venture to approach the suggestion of a remedy. An expert commission could undoubtedly make considerable expansion and improvement.

First then—to find a remedy for the condition of the downtown churches *it is vitally necessary that there should be some sacrifice of independence*. A frank recognition of the facts makes it inevitable that no such church can stand alone. It is possible for two or three people (I have known it so) to decline further support if the character of the work is to be funda-

mentally altered. To insist on maintaining a mere preaching station where the usual congregation has to travel miles, while a large population, craving another sort of ministry, is at the doors, is hardly making the best use of the building. It is only by the use of denominational guidance and help that the necessary adjustments can be made, and the forces gathered for adequate service. In this respect other denominations are better adapted than ours for the task; but even they are handicapped when their wealthy men resist innovation and prefer to put their money into more spectacular effort elsewhere rather than to the evangelisation of the depressed masses in the old centres. One would not be troubled if the more visible schemes brought help to the other, but in the main they don't. Their authors are too busy justifying the lavish and wasteful expenditure in buildings to find time and workers for the greater need.

The second condition for a successful approach to a remedy lies in *personal service*. This is the main and vital factor. I am growingly convinced that *it is not a question of money*. That will be needed in any case, but if the work is properly and sympathetically undertaken, the quantity required will not be excessive, and will not be abnormally difficult to find. The people on the spot already raise, by sacrificial giving, sums altogether out of proportion to those forthcoming in the less difficult centres, and the *normal* work would be largely self-supporting with the revival of heart, life, and interest. The running expenses of these churches, depressed and nearly empty, are disproportionate and wasteful. If they could become centres of active life, even though the congregations were composed of the poorest, it is astonishing what financial results would be obtained. The poor are extraordinarily generous and full of self-denial, more particularly in circumstances of need known to themselves. There is nothing spectacular in their giving, of course; it is even almost furtive. But it is there.

What is *not there* is a sufficiency of sympathetic workers. In any case there will have to be a lot of open-air work, and constant home visitation—frequently house to house—will be necessary. It will soon be evident what a *variety* of helpers will be required, and it is only possible to secure them by denominational influence. There are sources of supply at present untouched. Assuming a determined attempt to tackle the problem, the students from our colleges could be sent—as *part of their training*—for six or twelve months to work under the superintendent. They would gain invaluable experience, and would learn the secret of expressing only the truths (and that in homely and direct language) that matter in the stress of life. Outdoor congregations *can go away* during an address if it doesn't grip, and there

is no more valuable experience for a preacher. Furthermore, home visitation would teach much and tend to humanise preaching. Then there is that nucleus of brilliant young people who are to be found in some of our churches, and are deeply concerned about the alleged failure of "organised religion." That is a phrase largely confined to the newspapers and to small coteries of intellectuals. It is possible that some of our principal preachers come into contact with considerable numbers of this type—indeed they sometimes get hysterical about it—but the fact is that they are a small fraction of the people to whom we are sent. The great bulk of the people is completely indifferent to questions of abstruse theology and Biblical criticism. Religion is a matter of bread and butter to them, and they don't care whether the minister is orthodox, or heterodox, if he will only help them to live their difficult lives. I am aware that many of these young people are really anxious to serve, and do serve, but that service would be infinitely more valuable if one heard less of the expression, "The Church doesn't help me," and saw more of the determination to get on with the job and expect the "problems" to settle themselves. These are the people from whom most can be expected and whose help is most to be desired. After all, these manifestations of intellectual doubt are often only the growing pains of a fine character. Why not persuade them to put their *faith* to work in heroic self-sacrificing effort? In addition to these two types of available workers, there is the vast supply of ordinary members for whom little or nothing has been found by way of service in their own churches. They live busy lives, and only have selected times, principally at nights, when their help is available. They are often the life and soul of the social and devotional circles in their own church, and only in special cases should they be expected to serve for more than a limited time beyond its borders. Nevertheless many of them are specialists, and could far more profitably employ one evening a week in serving the needs of the downtown church than merely spending all in their own. Organising an imaginary "Lord Mayor's Banquet", or a mock parliament, may have its uses for some people who have time to waste, but is not comparable in value to teaching slum boys to cobble shoes or learn habits of discipline and study that will fit them for better things in life.

Assuming that volunteers can be secured for what is admittedly a herculean task, it remains to be said that wise guidance will be necessary to see that each has a proper place and specific duty. That is where efficient leadership comes in.

What then of the *organisation*? The word makes some people frantic. Great leaders of the Church are assumed to have created and sustained vast efforts simply by preaching and the

power of their intense spirituality. They haven't—behind them all there has been the body of able, consecrated men and women who have effaced themselves and given the very best of their business knowledge and ability—often after severe toil elsewhere—to the service of the Church.

Everything will be futile without a *good leader*—call him what you will. And it is precisely here that the local church needs denominational guidance. Too often churches seek a minister with an eye to one department of life and work, forgetting the rest. That blunder doesn't matter—so much—in a prosperous community. It is fatal in an enterprise that is many-sided and of such a character that experience must be allied to ability if success is to be achieved. This sort of job is not one for the "brilliant" man. Look rather for a man well trained and mentally disciplined, experienced, of sunny, optimistic, sympathetic disposition, caring nothing for the rewards of life, ambitious only to serve and keep on serving, patient under all circumstances, alert in brain and, though this is secondary provided other suitable help is available, a capable man of business. Put such an one to live on or near the premises and trust him fully to carry on. *That* may sound risky, but if the right man cannot be induced to take on the task, even if by so doing he leaves other more attractive and better-paid work, it is of little use to undertake the responsibility. The *premises* may need some adaptation, probably will if anything like all the following suggestions are adopted. But some useful start may be made in almost any one of the great buildings that are mainly in our mind. I think they should be continued as *churches*. There is nothing wrong with "missions," but there is in the use of the title a certain confession of defeat, a lowering of the standard, and a type of condescension that I can conceive to be loathsome to the thoughtful among those we want to reach. After all, is not evangelism the *raison d'être* of the Church? The buildings should never be shut. If they are in centres of population where the homeless and destitute are to be found, I can conceive that some of their best work will be done in sheltering those whose only refuge would otherwise be the streets, casual wards, or lodging-houses of the worst type. The old pews should go, for the main building would be in constant use for evangelistic and other preaching services—formal and informal—lectures, concerts, and miscellaneous entertainments. There is no doubt that plenty of willing help would be available for this kind of work; and it is fundamental that the House of God should be as homely and attractive as its ever-present rival, the public-house. Both on Sunday and weekdays numerous classes could be arranged, and there should be a forum at which every possible kind of debate could take place on any subject that

has the remotest connection with religion. In time men and women of every type of thought could be gathered to voice their grievances and discontents against God and man. This may seem anomalous, but they do it now at the street corners, pouring out to greedy listeners all kinds of undigested and indigestible scepticism without much in the way of contradiction. How much better to win them to stating their case where what is unreasonable can be patiently heard and shown to be so, while legitimate grievances can be discussed in an atmosphere of sympathy where the supreme desire is to help. The late Stephen Walsh told me not many months before he died that the working classes are not, as a whole, hostile to religion, and he was of opinion that such a course would soon win the support of the best of them, and have influence on the rest. It is essential, I think, that there should be something of a club, open every night of the week and managed by a committee composed mostly of its own members. Restrictions should only apply to practices and speech inimical to comfort, and of course gambling would be taboo. The fee should be very small, indeed the superintendent should have power to make it possible for *anybody* in need to get the shelter and companionship of the place. Those tragic legions of the unemployed could be enormously helped by the sympathy evidenced in such an arrangement. But above all—no condescension.

There is a great need for work among the women. I have attended and addressed many meetings of the poorest women in Liverpool. It is quite impossible either to forget or adequately describe the ghastly hopelessness written on their faces. The wife of a casual labourer is simply schooled in hopeless misery. But they respond to the sympathy that invites them to bring their babies—without whom they are immobile—out of the dreary dens they call home to the light, warmth, welcome, music, and sympathetic talks that good women know so well how to provide.

The opportunities for work among boys and girls are legion. The play centres arranged by Education Authorities are evidence of that where they exist. Their activities can be supplemented and extended by the churches. For they are open for a comparatively short time and suffer the limitations (and the virtues) of salaried labour. There is need for more complete organisation even where they exist, and the Christian urge should make it possible to organise boys' and girls' clubs for almost every conceivable purpose. Brigades, Scouts, Guides, and their more juvenile counterparts; sports of all kinds, indoor and outdoor; bands—of different instruments—arts and handicrafts; classes for shoemaking, carpentry, metal-work, &c., dancing and physical exercises, sewing and knitting circles, with their allied occupations

—these and all manner of others could be arranged if the help of the young people in the other churches could be obtained. The children are there in swarms, coming from sordid homes, with their only playgrounds the streets. What better service could there be than to make them happy and direct their splendid enthusiasms into useful channels? Think also of the hosts of domestic servants, away from home in a strange city. Often free on Sunday afternoon and evening and with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Where *do* they go? And what do they *do*?

For all—men, women, and children—don't forget Thrift and Holiday Clubs. Managed under proper control, with finances adequately safeguarded, they could be of immense value, as many who have organised them can testify. And the caretakers! How the unsuitable can hinder! But how the strong, good-natured, consecrated man and wife could win the affections of a large clientele and make a happy atmosphere!

What of *Sunday*? I know a certain mission in Liverpool where it has been calculated that nearly 12,000 attendances are made on Sunday at the various services and other gatherings. True, it is not altogether a fair criterion in our connection, for it is largely under the control of a well-to-do layman, a large local employer of labour, who sees to it that nothing is lacking in buildings, equipment, and organisation. And it is not a down-town church. But its type of activity is just what is required. There are adequate meetings for prayer; there are fully graded Sunday Schools, well staffed; there are properly conducted, separate and special services for children and young people, in separate halls, with music by their own bands. And after the service in the evening there are social gatherings, where young and old may meet—the homeless lad and his lass can be sheltered instead of being driven into the streets in any weather. All these things have been thought out. It is seldom that so complete an equipment of suitable buildings can be found, and existing limitations would, of course, curtail a lot that is desirable. But much can be attempted by Christians of vision and determination, with an ample store of faith and patience.

The services need never be cheap and tawdry in character. A quiet, reverent worship in the morning would give the opportunity for the exposition of Scripture. In the evening there is no room for anything but the evangelistic. Before the service the doors should be thrown open so that the people could gather for community singing. A sympathetic organist (and no other type is worthy of so sacred an opportunity) would have no difficulty in accepting the choice of favourite hymns and choruses from Sankey's Book—and others that contain popular



numbers. Let them sing, too, in the service. Of course, that will settle itself—apart from the occasional endurance of a well-sung anthem, or preferably a *simple* solo—they won't come if they are not allowed to express themselves in song. Many of my readers may remember the name and fame of George Wise, of the Protestant Reformers' Church, Liverpool. He is dead, and nobody can be hurt if I say something of his work. He was much misunderstood (and very much hated in Roman Catholic quarters); but I was privileged to know him well and to see his work at first hand. Unfortunately, the organisation that supported him was undoubtedly political, but his Christian personality was so strong that, apart from his militant Protestantism, he did some of the finest Christian work in the city. His cultural gifts were as sure as his spiritual outlook was gigantic. His morning service was crowded, his afternoon Bible Class for men, where big themes were discussed, was 900 strong; and the evening service was always in a church packed to suffocation. With barely time to air the buildings after the afternoon class, the doors were thrown open to those who came to sing, and the evening service frequently began over half an hour before the appointed time because there was no room to put in any more people. They were drawn, not by the man's wide reading and ability to deal with everything that is fascinating in passing phases of theological thought and political and social activity, but by the fact that he knew the circumstances of his hearers and addressed his message to their hearts. So they responded, and an erstwhile derelict church became a centre of vital Christian life and energy.

The same is true of *some* of the big, unattached missions. They are attended, as to a large proportion, by those who used to attend the ordinary churches. Why have they left? The answer may be manifold. It is more to the purpose to ask *why have they gone there?* If we could supply the answer to that and rule our actions by our appreciation of the facts, some part of our problem might be solved.

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