

The Cultivation of the Spiritual Life.

IT must be reckoned as one of the few benefits of the present state of world affairs, that the Church has been shaken out of the last vestiges of complacency and with a shock brought up against hard facts. Many of us are for the first time viewing the world situation and the position of the Church with our blinkers off, and the prospect is not very encouraging. We are justified in ignoring a great deal of the cheap clap-trap in the popular Press about the dying Church, but no one who has the cause of the Kingdom of God at heart can regard the position with complacency. Moreover, the cessation of hostilities will increase rather than decrease our problems. The time of reconstruction and rebuilding after the war will be a crucial one, for the brave new world which is to emerge may either be one which will see the death and burial of institutional Christianity, or one which will see a great step forward towards the coming of the Kingdom of God.

This period of post-war reconstruction will, then, be a critical one for the Church, and talk about it is already in the air. It is, therefore, timely that we should remind ourselves not to be duped by a great deal of talk about a "Christian Social Order," a "Christian International Order," "Christian Economics" and so on, when a moment's thought will convince us that you cannot have Christian anything without Christians. Moreover, to reconstruct our national or international affairs along more enlightened, humanitarian lines is not necessarily to be Christian. It is so easy to forget that much of our social service may be a sop to an uneasy conscience, and merely a method of evading our Christian duty. It is easy to give a man better conditions, but hard to give him God, and much of the social and relief work upon which we have been engaged, although necessary and excellent in its own way, brings uncomfortably to my own mind the words of Studdert Kennedy. As he thought about the nick-name of "Woodbine Willie" which Tommy Atkins gave him in the last war, he said :

" Their name, let me hear it,
The symbol of unpaid, unpayable debt—
For the men to whom I owed God's peace
I put off with a cigarette ! "

It does not require too much imagination to be haunted by the dread that the Christian Church and the post-war world may fail by giving new homes and new conditions to men and women whose souls are dying for the need of God.

Madame Guyon, in her *Short and Easy Method of Prayer*, said, " We often apply a remedy to the body while the disease is at the heart. The reason why we succeed so little in reforming mankind

is that we deal with the outside, and the effect of all that we can do there very soon passes away, but if we gave them first the key to the inner life, the outside would be reformed as a perfectly easy and natural consequence."

This quotation, although applied here to social reconstruction, was originally intended to apply to the interior life, and if it is true that the Churches, although rising nobly to the social challenge, find it extremely difficult to meet the spiritual challenge, it would be well to consider whether these words do not hold the key to our troubles. The fact that the Church is so often spiritually impotent is because the interior life of its members is so pitifully poor, and as Evelyn Underhill says, "The periods of Christian decadence have always been periods when this costly interior life of personal devotion has been dim."

There are some people in our Churches who are desperately keen on reconstruction and who are eager to reconstruct anything, except the one thing that matters—their own interior life. On the other hand, it would be quite false to say that the problem is to get people to pray. The truth is that they do not know *how* to pray, and the further and shameful truth is that many of them have never been taught. It is quite useless to ask a man to play a musical instrument, to paint a picture, or to do anything else which he has not been taught to do, and we must face the fact that most of our young people have never been taught to pray, but have been left to get together such information about prayer and the inner life as they might pick up in odd places. We have, in fact, encouraged spiritual Peter Pan-ism by leaving them to a completely undeveloped prayer life. In *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law cites the cause of Mundanus, who had improved every business method and every utensil that came his way in order to make them more effective and useful, but still prayed in the out-worn form of prayer which he had learned at his mother's knee. In consequence it was not surprising that prayer to him did not seem vital or interesting.

As Baptists we have witnessed faithfully to the need for personal experience and individual responsibility. Evelyn Underhill says of us, "No other Church has insisted as the Baptists have done on the centrality of the New Testament connection between baptism and personal faith, the importance of this great symbolic act of surrender to God; and on a realistic conversion of the whole life, inward and outward, as the condition of entrance into the Divine Society."

But against this quotation we must set another, this time by B. C. Plowright, who says, "Complete spiritual mastery does not come easily, it has to be won. Growth in spiritual insight and freshness is the prize of right living resting on steady discipline, and up to a certain point we have to row against the stream.

"Has not the gravest failure of Protestantism, at all events in

its later years, been that it has failed to provide such spiritual discipline and guidance? It has made conversion the main aim of its preaching and witness, and has quite forgotten that what happens after conversion is quite as important as what happens before it."

For many young people, the day of their baptism has been the day of the supreme tragedy of their spiritual life. There are few young people who come to us and ask for baptism who are not utterly sincere, but we sometimes fail to recognise the great step it is for them and how they have steeled themselves to this public witness to the faith that is in them. So often, however, their reaction after baptism is to feel that everything necessary has been done, and in consequence to relax. Often, from the very day of baptism, a gradual spiritual decline sets in. The watchword of the spiritual life is, "He must increase, but I must decrease," but so often we have not taught them that the spiritual life must be progressive and that their experience of God must be an increasing intimacy of love and communion. It is surely through lack of this kind of training that we have not built up that core of mature Christians which is necessary to make any Church a real spiritual power. No doubt all of us could cite puzzling cases of young Church members who seemed keen enough, who were "in everything" and regular attenders, who suddenly fell away. They ceased to come, and no amount of visiting and trying to get hold of them brought them back. The reason is that these young people had never built up a real devotional life of their own. They had joined the Church as they might join a Club, but their allegiance to our Lord had never deepened or strengthened. There was no interior life to hold them. It is vital that we should train all our young people to build up this inner life and to get to know God for themselves.

There are certain elementary lessons about the interior life which must be taught as soon as these young Christians launch the frail barque of their own spiritual experience on the limitless seas of the inner life.

I would regard the following principles as the necessary foundations:

First, it must be understood that the Christian life is a life of growth.

Secondly, that devotion is a definite attitude of mind and will, and not a vague, emotional feeling. I have never yet been able to better the definition of devotion given by St. Francis de Sales: "Devotion is really nothing more nor less than a general inclination and readiness to do that which we know to be acceptable to God." It seems to me to be extremely unfortunate that when John Wesley was converted in Aldersgate Street his heart was "strangely warmed," for since that epoch-making conversion every evangelical has considered that he ought to feel strangely warmed whenever he has a real experience of God. Hence the worship of "good times"

in our Churches, when we lose ourselves in an upsurge of the emotions, or become temporarily elated over the hearty singing of our favourite hymn. This may be valuable if it hardens into a resolve to do God's will, but if it is allowed to evaporate without being captured for the service of God, it may be positively harmful. Surely the story of the Pharisee and the Publican warns us against taking our feelings as guides.

Thirdly, they must know that God's gifts are for all, and that if we hold out empty hands in faith and hope, God will fill them. One of the most tragic things that I have ever read in any spiritual work is the following quotation from de Caussade :

"What are called extraordinary and privileged graces are so called solely because there are few souls faithful enough to be worthy to receive them."

Fourthly, as devotion and emotion are not synonyms, we must train our young people not to become enslaved to their feelings. "I pray when I feel like it" is an attitude which must be outgrown, for if God is worthy of praise and adoration He is not less so because we do not feel like it, and if it is our duty and privilege to pray for others it does not follow that they need our prayers less because we are suffering from depression, or a feeling of the morning after the night before.

Fifthly, we must help them to combat that fashionable modern disease which might be described as hecticcity. For many, life is so crowded, and they live in such a prevailing state of hectic rush, that it is terribly easy to develop the "must-catch-the-bus-if-I-die-in-the-attempt" attitude to life. We infect each other with this sense of hurry and worry, and in its later stages the disease prevents our settling with a quiet mind to consider anything at all, and makes it quite impossible to quieten the mind for communion with God.

Sixthly, they must learn that prayer is governed by the same rules as the rest of life. It really is fatuous never to concentrate on anything or never to attempt to read a serious book and then to complain that concentration in prayer is so very difficult. It may, in fact, be said in sober truth that to pray well we must live well, for prayer is only the reflection of our own selves. Hence the enormous importance of forming good habits.

In the seventh and last place, we must warn them against the perils of the way, remembering that "forewarned is forearmed." Sooner or later the young people will encounter such times of spiritual aridity as have had a noble descent from the Psalmist when he said, "How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord, for ever?" through the Saints to every man and woman who has tried the inner life. If young Christians do not realise this they will tend to panic when they feel that their prayers are not rising higher than the ceiling, and that Bible reading and other devotional exercises seem completely profitless and pointless.

We must warn them against Pharisaism and any tendency to regard themselves as better than others because they are making this effort to cultivate the inner life. This will be combated successfully if we teach them never to compare their own lives with any other but that of Christ. This, to use a fine phrase of the Abbé Bremond, "disinfects from egotism" and ensures the note of humility without which any progress in spiritual knowledge is not spiritual progress.

Perhaps the most dangerous rock on which the frail barque may founder is that of despair. We are all tempted to despair at times, but *we* have that knowledge of God's boundless mercy which is born of experience. We need to tell them three things about despair :

First, that a Christian is not a man who guarantees that he will never fall, but a man who guarantees that when he does fall he will call on God to assist him to his feet again. In fact the Christian acknowledges that he is a man who does fall and must by himself inevitably fall. As St. Aloysius so beautifully put it, "He who gives way to annoyance and discouragement when he falls, proves that he does not know himself and forgets that he is made of a soil which can only bring forth thorns and thistles."

Secondly, that no lull in the battle can be expected for one moment. They must count the cost before setting out on the journey. They can expect peace : no facile feeling, but the only peace worthy of the name—the deep peace that comes of doing God's will.

Thirdly, that they may learn from mistakes and falls how to avoid occasions of sin in the future, and may learn, too, through their falls, dependence upon God and to make their surrender to our Lord more complete.

In short, "God shall forgive thee all, but thy despair."

It has been noted that good habit is of primary importance, and it is certainly the best shield against these attacks of the enemy. It is the backbone of the devotional life, and I firmly believe that to be healthy the inner life must be maintained by means of a Rule. Young people should be encouraged to examine their normal working day critically and to decide for themselves when they can set aside twenty minutes or half-an-hour for Bible reading, prayer and quiet.

There is no doubt that the early morning is by far the best time, for at least three reasons :

First, that the mind is fresh.

Secondly, that the whole of the day lies in front of us, with its duties and opportunities which can be thought through and dedicated to God. This must be done in the spirit of the hymn, "At Thy feet, O Christ, we lay Thine own gift of this new day." This hymn alone, thought through prayerfully in the early morning, will be a real means of grace, and I greatly regret that the revisers of our hymnal have left it out of the revised edition.

Thirdly, it is for many of us the only time of day when we have no duties to perform and no calls upon our time. Moreover,

getting up early is in itself a salutary discipline for most young people, and largely depends upon getting to bed early at night—another and equally salutary form of discipline.

It may be, however, that owing to working on shifts, living in an overcrowded home, or some other circumstance, it is quite impossible to have this time of quiet early in the morning. In such a case, the minister must come to the rescue and try to help plan some other time or place. An open Church near home or near the place of work will often afford opportunity for quiet, especially during the lunch hour, and sometimes the few moments between the evening meal and going out may provide the natural pause in which to come to God.

The Rule should be exacting but not impossible, and once it is made it should be looked upon as a definite service to God to keep it.

Whether or not a particular spot is kept for quiet and prayer, it is certain that there should be a quiet place in the mind where we can retire to be alone with God. To quote St. Francis of Assisi: "For wherever we go or stay we have with us a cell. Brother Body is our cell, and the soul sits in it like a hermit and thinks of God and prays to Him, and if the soul does not remain in quiet in this cell other cells which are built will be of little profit." We must teach our young people that they can retire to the quiet place in their own minds during bus or train journeys or even long walks. Here it will be found that a simple set form of prayer will be of great assistance. When we cannot concentrate sufficiently to make mental prayer, to repeat a known and dear form of words, which can be filled out with our own thoughts and prayers, is an incalculable help.

There are a great number of methods of prayer which cannot be explored here. We must help our young people to find the method of prayer which suits them best, and this involves knowing them well, their individual outlook and make-up. It is said of Father Faber, the well-known hymn writer, that he discoursed for an hour on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, of whom he was a great admirer. His closing words were: "This, then, my dear brethren, is St. Ignatius' way to heaven; and, thank God, it is not the only way." In the same spirit we must be ready to believe that our favourite method may not suit everyone. There is, moreover, no salvation in any method, and we must guard against worshipping the method rather than worshipping God. In parenthesis, it may be noted that the tragedy of many a young Sunday School teacher has been that he or she has felt that by adopting modern methods of Sunday School technique, good teaching would come inevitably. It does not, of course, for no method can take the place of the consecrated and loving heart, and we need to be on our guard that the means do not become the end. There must be no enslavement to method in any sense. Crutches are to help the lame to walk, but when we are able to walk by ourselves, it is sheer folly to retain the

crutches. The method is to help us to pray, but if at any point our spirit catches fire and we find that the spirit of prayer is there, the method has done its work and should be discarded.

Devotional reading books and prayer books should be used in the same way—to be our guide and not our chain.

It is easy for a boy to strain himself by an over-zealous effort to become "tough" by physical exercise. That danger also exists in the spiritual sphere. There may well be an initial strain in turning over from one devotional method to another, but there should be no lasting strain. If this develops, or a bad bout of introspection comes on, it is well to drop all except the simplest and most objective prayers for a short time. Adolescents are naturally inclined to be introspective, and exacting self-examination should be avoided unless there is real need for it. The subjective note will appeal to them most strongly and most of the deepest spiritual work will probably be done along that line, but a constant look-out is necessary. Their gaze must often be diverted from themselves and directed towards the mighty acts of God in the birth, life and death of our Lord.

It is necessary to teach young people very simply about the various kinds of prayer. It is here, perhaps, that the long prayer, so dear in some of our churches, has been a great offender. It has strung together adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition in one long, rambling discourse, which has made it difficult for the hearer constantly to adjust his mind from one attitude to another. We must also teach them how to be quiet before God, listening for Him to speak, in the spirit of "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." We must guard against the modern tendency to reverse that prayer into "Hear, Lord, for Thy servant speaketh." It is an enormous help to teach them how to give thanks and what to give thanks about, how to pray for themselves and for others, and how to compare their own lives with that of our Lord as a basis for confession.

Perhaps the most important thing of all, and to me the most difficult, is to give some teaching on adoration. Adoration is a realisation of creatureliness and a consequent acknowledgment that God is wholly other. Thus it not only produces an awed sense of the numinous, but it has a much more immediate and practical result: it is a dethroning of the idol of self, and a setting of God in the centre of things. This puts everything in proper perspective and prevents introspection.

You will not have got very far with this kind of instruction before you will have come up against a difficulty: the young people will ask in what words they are to pray. Frankly, at the beginning, I do not think that words matter very much, as long as the pictures are right. Here, however, we come across the sad fact that we have neglected above all to teach the old and beautiful art of meditation. To meditate is not only to pray well, but to read the Bible by the

most fruitful method. Moreover, it has the advantage of being a picture method, making the scripture live and the prayer flow naturally from the great scenes in the life of our Lord. There are, of course, many methods of meditation, and here again it will be necessary to cast about to find the right one. There is a very effective method of prayer by meditation which was taught by Studdert Kennedy, contained in the book, *When We Pray*, by Ronald Sinclair. Personally, I always teach a modified form of the Sulpician method as being the easiest and simplest to learn.

But although one may recommend meditation and the use of set forms of prayer in certain circumstances, it is obviously necessary that the learner should become accustomed to making mental prayer in his own words, and here we have to remember the simple truth that prayer is being with God. When we are with a friend whom we really know and love, we can be silent without embarrassment and talk without considering the topic or the words which we choose.

There is a story about Dr. Watts Ditchfield, the first bishop of Chelmsford, that he was one morning working in his study upon some very important work and hoping against hope that he would not be disturbed. Soon, however, the door opened and his little girl sidled in. He went on working, but pulled open one of the drawers of his desk and said, "There are some sweets in there." To his surprise, she replied, "But I don't want a sweet." Feeling that all hope of quiet was lost he laid down his pen, turned round his chair and said, "Well, what do you want?" To which she replied, "I don't want anything. I only want to be with you." That joy in being in the presence of one dear and understood is the essence of prayer, and while we must always check any tendency to gossip to God in a disrespectful way, naturalness and spontaneity are of the essence of prayer, especially for young people.

What young people probably need most are the practical hints, such as that one can only pray well if one can pray intelligently. To pray for missionaries is bound to be a pretty lukewarm prayer. To pray for missionaries in Africa is far better, but if one knows individual missionaries and their needs, and still more if one has taken the trouble to read up the African background and the particular problems which missionaries are now facing in Africa, together with something of the history and general background of the country, the prayer tends to become alive and vital. Again, young people need to be told that resolutions are no good when they are of the vague "I must be different" variety, but that they need to be practical things which they can go out and do immediately. They also need to be told to guard against wool gathering in prayer and quiet, and that it is a good thing always to have a devotional reading book and a prayer book at hand when the spirit flags. They need to be told of the value of a pencil and notebook in concentrating the attention and crystallizing one's thoughts.

Possibly, however, many of you are now wondering where on earth I imagine that all this teaching is to be done. That, I think, must depend upon the individual Church. I suppose that nearly all of us have some spiritual meeting where instruction of this kind can be given. It may be a young people's fellowship, or a study group, or a Bible Class, but in many cases it will be something that grows out of the Church Membership Class or class for baptism. I may be a heretic, but I prefer to have Church Membership Classes after rather than before baptism, for the reason which I have outlined above; young people rarely ask for baptism without being desperately in earnest and sincere, and if I am sure of that fact before baptism I am satisfied, but I am acutely aware of the danger of the steady decline commencing immediately after baptism. It is then that it is so important to capture the young people and instruct them, commencing with the reminder that the Christian life must be progressive, and that they have just started on a journey rather than having arrived at any destination. My own experience is that one can make quite meaty doctrine intelligible and attractive by taking sufficient time to think out simple words instead of the technical terms which we throw about so easily, and by taking the time to think out analogies and allegories which help them to understand.

It is well at the end of the course of Church Membership Classes to suggest an occasional class, and indeed my last two Church Membership Classes made the suggestion for themselves. They come about once a month to clear up any difficulties that have arisen, ask for replies to questions which have been raised at work or elsewhere, and to check up on the general direction things are taking.

It is well to remember that with young people, fellowship and community are their natural forms of expression, and to get a real sense of community amongst young people is to go most of the way to making prayer real. May I illustrate what I mean by a story about our own Scout Troop. At a Scout meeting one night the usual concentrated uproar was going on when Skipper called for a pause to give the notices. He then said that he had read in the Headquarters' *Bulletin* a story of the heroism of a Chinese Scout which he thought the troop would like to hear. He then read out a most striking and appealing story of a Chinese Scout who lost his life trying to help others during an air raid on a Chinese city. The effect was magical. There was a deep sense of community and fellowship between those boys in the East End and an unknown Chinese boy who wore the same uniform and had taken the same promise. In the eloquent silence which followed, Skipper very wisely said, "Let us pray." That prayer was one of the most real things I have ever taken part in. It was backed by every boy in the hall and there was a feeling of real community. They were in fellowship with the boy who had made the great sacrifice.

But fellowship is a by-product and nothing is more pathetic

than some of the young people's fellowships who come together to seek fellowship by playing badminton or ping-pong. Fellowship is something which is realised when we are thrown together in some common cause, and the greater the cause the deeper the fellowship. If I wanted to produce a sense of fellowship among young people I would attempt it by giving them some job to do which I knew was too big for them, which would tax every ounce of spiritual strength which they possessed and would drive them back on to each other and far more vitally on to God.

When fellowship is achieved, however, its natural expression will come through corporate ways, and it is within the community so formed that prayer will become vital. For example, the strong sense of community in the Scout Troop reaches its deepest expression and reality at camp and at other events where the group comes together exclusively as a group. There is something very real and vital about the way our Scouts' Own prays for Scouts in the Forces. When community is achieved such things as week-end camps, study groups, and, above all, retreats, will become experiences where real prayer is found. May I urge with all the emphasis that I can command the desperate need for Retreats. I cannot understand why the Free Churches do not feel their need more vitally. I know that conditions are difficult, but if it is possible to get the young people together in a house, or on the Church premises, to spend even a full half-day, or, better still, a week-end, in retreat, incalculable good will be done. A retreat need not be grim, and it is not a thing only to be attempted by a company of contemplatives. At a Retreat which we held at West Ham, a boy of twenty who worked at Billingsgate took eagerly to 2½ hour periods of quiet, and urged that we should do it again. Perhaps we have never realised the desperate need some of our people have for these periods of retirement from the everyday hustle of the world, to be quiet with God. May I emphasize, too, that a Retreat is not a Conference, and that I have yet to find a successful effort to combine the two.

All this work cannot be attempted in a mechanical way. In the selection of devotional books, the arrangement of the quiet time, and the general spiritual direction of young people, there is one golden rule, which is to remember that they are individuals. Their capabilities, temperaments and difficulties must be studied individually, and this will require considerable spiritual insight, and that, in turn, only comes through prayer. So often we say to people, "I can only pray for you," as if in a tone of apology. I am convinced that to pray for people is the greatest thing we can do for them.

I have just been reading Forbes Robinson's *Letters to His Friends*, and have been humbled by the realisation of the fervour of his prayer for his friends, and of the many times when he quotes St. Paul as expressing his own experience, "My little children for whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you." Do

we pray for our young people like that and are we as concerned about them? Forbes Robinson said: "You must at all costs *make* quiet time. Give up work if need be. Your influence finally depends upon your own first-hand knowledge of the unseen world, and on your experience of prayer. Love and sympathy and tact and insight are born of prayer."

I very much doubt whether any of us know how much influence we have among our own young people. Perhaps we can best estimate it by looking back at the influence which good men and women have had in our lives. There is only one safe way of wielding that influence, and that is with much prayer.

If we feel a concern about the spiritual life in our Churches and especially about the spiritual life of our young people, it must surely appeal to us as a call, not to organise more meetings—which may be a sop to an uneasy conscience—but to deepen our own spiritual lives. It is a humiliating truth that we cannot see others' spiritual needs when we ourselves are spiritually impoverished. It is when we rise far enough Godward that God permits us to overflow manward.

It is the man who is living close enough to Christ who has the quick eye to see those signs which mean so much for good or ill in the life of a young person. When you see the dreaded signs of inner decay; the easy excuse, the insensitiveness to spiritual things, the falling moral standard, then it may or may not be the time to speak, but it is the time to pray. God can then win back those young people only through the man who knows the secret of prayer which costs. That man will then retire to the secret place and in silent suffering will unite himself with his suffering Lord. God permits us to suffer in some faint image of His suffering for them and in His great mercy uses our suffering for their redemption.

It is this costing prayer which is so often under God the instrument of redemption, and I therefore address these admonitions on prayer, not only to the beginner in the Christian life, but to you and to myself, lest that by any means when we have preached to others we ourselves may be castaways.

DENIS LANT.