

presbyter who was the successor of the intensely revered St. Columba.

Keltic Christianity was very independent, but insular, and therefore narrow. Yet the Scots in Iona were free from the race-hatred which disfigured the Christianity of the British in Wales. While the British Christians stood aloof, these generous Scots came over to help, and brought many of our forefathers to the knowledge of Christ. We are thankful for this ; but we may also be thankful that the form of Christianity which they brought was not the one which ultimately prevailed.



“If the Edge be Blunt—”

A STUDY IN EFFECTIVENESS.

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THE world is not agreed on many points ; but there is one demand which it makes with one voice—viz., the demand for effectiveness. It measures movements, and it measures men, by the work they turn out—by their output.

And what it insists on for the secular man it insists on, too, for the religious man, for the Church of God.

It is not enough that we move briskly, and that our coat-tails fly, that we have big organizations and large ideas, that our bells are constantly ringing and our organs resounding. It quietly stops us in the midst of all this energy and asks us, when we have got our breath again, “Well, what is coming out of all this ?”

And when we are tempted to reply that our spiritual work is not to be measured, like a carpenter's or a gardener's, we are pulled up short by some memories of the past—when results *did* accrue, when every word seemed to tell, when every visit seemed to lift, and when we waded almost knee-deep in our harvest spoils.

Neither may we fall back with any real satisfaction on the *invisible returns* of our work, for, while it is certainly true that we shall never know upon earth all that we have achieved, we are never told that we must see *none*. Peter and his fellows were directed to let down their nets *for a draught*, and so are we. Christ ordained us that we might "go and bring forth *fruit*." And when we see a Peter in the crowded Jerusalem street netting his thousands, and a Paul sallying forth to plant his living Churches in Asia and Europe, we recognize that what has been should be again—yea, and has been again in this very England of ours.

It is in connection with the Church's failure, and more especially in connection with our own failures, that I have suggested a solution of much of the mystery—"If the edge be blunt——" A bad workman, they say, quarrels with his tools. Our quarrel to-day is only with the blunted edges.

First of all let me point out *what ought to be*. Now, undoubtedly, the merit of a cutting-tool lies in its sharpness, and the wise workman sees carefully to the edge. Whether planing a board, or shaving a chin, or cutting off a leg, the edge is the essential thing.

Its application to our ministerial work is no fanciful one; it is strictly Biblical.

We are sent to drive *a straight furrow* in the fields of the world, to turn the hard clods for the coming seed-time. But the ploughshare must be sharp if the work is to be done well.

We have had deposited in our hands, especially at our ordination, the Word of God which is *the sword of the Spirit*, with its two edges. But preaching the Word involves the man as well as the message, and you cannot secure a clean cut with a blunted man.

The pruning knife is part of our equipment to cut off all noxious growths, all unholy pretensions, for are we not under-gardeners to the great Husbandman? But you cannot cut even a thistle with an edgeless knife.

The sickle, too, is a Divine instrument in the gathering in of a harvest, but what avails the sweep of a blunted sickle?

The truth is that the tool must be fitted to the work, and, whether it be human or material, the edge must be keen if the work is to be good.

We have now to inquire *what the edge is* in our human ministries.

Not necessarily, I think, *a keen intellect*. In the sphere of mind, the influence of a highly cultured man is unrivalled, but in the sphere of soul and spirit many an unlettered working man will put him to shame.

Neither can we think that the edge is bound up with *dignity and place*. An Archbishop may send a congregation to sleep as effectively as the rawest deacon. Dignity is more likely to blunt than to sharpen, human nature being what it is.

Orthodoxy is a precious commodity, but it may as easily tend to dulness as to vivacity. In so far as a tool is well tempered, so far is it a gain; but it need not therefore be well edged.

Eloquence is exceedingly attractive and arresting, but it may be as useless as the fireworks to which it is often compared. It may startle and dazzle without inflicting one little cut of conviction.

In truth, edge is something independent of gifts, even the most rare and brilliant, and, as a matter of fact, a man may be the roughest of rough diamonds, as rough-hewn as a bit of quarried granite, and yet possess the edge which will cut clear and deep.

Edge depends on character more than endowments; on spirituality more than standing; and he is the keenest-edged man whose heart beats the truest to the Eternal, and whose warm blood circulates the most rapidly. Let a man's inner being be gripped mightily by the power of God's truths in Christ; let there be a fresh correspondence between his soul and God's Spirit; let his convictions be rooted deep, and his love be all-embracing; let him be immersed in the consciousness of the presence of God, and out of faith and love will come that cutting edge of power which effects so much.

Such a man is a Christian at his earthly best, swayed by Divine power, and sharpened in the Divine workshop. He is of Heaven's tempering, and is qualified best of all to serve the Master's purposes. Self is quiescent, and he seeks only his Saviour's glory and his fellows' good.

Now we are better able to face the query, "If the edge be blunt—what then?"

In the first place, *our work will be poor*, as poor as the mechanic's work after his use of blunted tools. It can hardly be anything else. We shall go on preaching sermons, and our people will be set a-wondering what is wrong, why the right tone is missing, why they cannot keep their attention fixed, and, perhaps, what is the good of listening to sermons at all. We shall visit, too, with much punctiliousness, but we shall not see the grey despair passing and the light breaking in.

In the second place, with our blunted edge *our work will be hard*. It will be all collar-work, no joy or zest in it, but just sheer drudgery. It will be so hard that we shall look forward to it with weariness, and be glad when it is done. The ministry is just galley-slave work when the edge is turned. Physically, too, the labour will be greater, since we never preach so boisterously as when the Spirit is lacking, for, almost unconsciously, we are trying to make up in physical exertion what we lack in spiritual power.

In the third place, *our work will be tactless*. That gentle spirit which touches with just the right pressure on just the right place will be missing, and in its room will come that loveless violence which hurts and wounds. Strong words lovingly spoken cannot exasperate, but lovelessly spoken they rasp and draw blood, like a blunted razor on a sensitive skin.

If the edge be blunt *we shall be tempted to injustice*, blaming the unsympathetic people rather than our unsympathetic selves. We have most of us heard sad tales (perhaps told them) of an unresponsive people, hard and obstinate, resisting the truth. Perhaps we have dubbed them Gospel-hardened. And all the time it has been our own fault, because

we have conveyed our Gospel with chilled fingers, mere frozen chunks of truth, and, failing to be true in love, we have been true in chilliness, which works out in absolute failure.

If the edge be blunt we shall be likely *to drive men away from God's pastures*. I know no more awful fact than this, that we are compelled to stand forth as the exponents of God's character, and that hundreds may be turned out of the way by our unspirituality of tone, or expression, or accent. How many tens of thousands turned Mohammedans from the dryness and deadness of the Christian Church of the seventh century and onwards! An earnest, seeking soul, if he cannot find satisfaction in the Christian Church, will wander into other folds, will embrace New Theology, Christian Science—or, in fact, any “ology” which comes with any warmth in it. Coldness is repulsive to men, and the best of truth, if the chill be on it, will be rejected. It is a terrible responsibility, and we shall do well to face it.

Now, it will not be a vain inquiry if we try to discover *how the edge gets blunted*.

It is not hard to find out. We have only to dip into our own experiences to discover many reasons for it.

A wrong atmosphere will do it, collecting the rust upon the edge, and eating its keenness away. This world of men and things is a damp world, which soon takes the shine out of all bright things if they are exposed to its influence. It is difficult to define what worldliness is, but we have a pretty good suspicion when “the world is too much with us.”

A lack of proper care for the edge will do it. The truth is that we must wage a perpetual battle for the retention of our spirituality, and it takes our whole attention to keep the edge intact. The moment we let the indolent spirit intrude itself, and relax our vigilance, letting things take their chance and drift, then we find the evil bluntness has come.

Using our energies and strength for wrong purposes is as sure a corrosive as to use our razor to cut a stick. Perhaps we find ourselves lending too attentive an ear to man's adulations,

and laying ourselves out for popularity. This is fatal. In a moment the edge is gone, and we are reduced to impotence.

Failure to renew the edge will do it. The more we give out of our heart's energies and affections the more renewal they require. The virtue which goes out of us has to be replaced. And if we fail to do this we are useless. Christian work is all edge-work; the wear and tear is there, and the resharpening must of necessity follow.

False dependencies will mar the edge of our spirituality. It may be that we have had a glorious time when the sharp edge did its work. And then, almost imperceptibly, we shift our centre, as if the impetus we had received would last on. Veering slowly around, we find ourselves depending on our past experiences, trading on our past successes—in a word, living on our own resources. Of course, we collapse as a balloon when the gas has leaked away, or as a steamboat when the fires have gone out.

Very frequently *success will do it*, generating a disintegrating spirit which dissolves all our keenness. There are few men who are not spoiled by success, for success brings down the soiling breath of men which rusts our edge away. We need a triple armour when praise is falling. It is worse for the soul than cannon-balls for the body.

One other subject remains—*the culture of the edge*.

If our ministerial power be entirely a matter of spirituality, then it is there that the culture is needed.

The grand problem which meets us is how to get self out, how to get God in. The two must go together. We dis-establish self by giving ourselves over to God. The early workers were filled with the Holy Ghost, as the ascending Christ promised, "Ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you." And wherever there has been a fresh infusion of the Holy Ghost, there the spiritual fires have broken out afresh in the hearts of men.

There is no other way. A life of self-surrender, a life of absolute and continuous faith, a receptive spirit which is ever

drawing in of the fulness of God, is all that we need. And this, linked with the Gospel of the grace of God, will make us “able—or sufficient or *efficient*—ministers of the New Testament.”

Then the edge is keen and bright and sharp, and all goes well. “Who is sufficient for these things?” “Our sufficiency is of God.”

A suggestive illustration of all this occurred in the life of Pilkington of Uganda.

There came a time in his missionary career when the edge of his spiritual service was blunted, when he achieved nothing. There were no conversions, and those who had become Christians were slipping back. A blight had fallen upon the Church.

The suspicion that there was something vitally wrong somewhere was brought to a head when one day a convert declared his intention of reverting to heathenism, as Christianity was doing nothing for him. “Your religion does not profit me at all. I have done with it.”

Pilkington’s discouragement was so keen that he felt as if he must retire from the mission-field altogether. Like Thomas, in his despair, he kept away even from the missionaries’ prayer-meeting.

But God led him away into solitude, to an island on the lake, where, with his Bible and a little book by a Tamil evangelist, he fought out the question which so perplexed his soul. And this was his conclusion, that he needed the Holy Ghost’s power for service. He sought and found, receiving the promised gift; and then went back to his work with the edge keen and sharp.

There is nothing more impressive in this world than a soul on fire, and it was this very thing which began to work on missionaries and converts and heathen when he returned. The fire of life and love fell everywhere, and the work leaped forwards, seizing on the most careless, amongst them our friend who had threatened to give up his Christian profession.

And, surely, the time is not lost that we spend in prayer and

communion, any more than the reaper wastes *his* time when he stops so often to whet his scythe. He knows the value of the edge.

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." Not by sturdy arms or moistened brow, but by the cutting edge, the edge *not* blunt.

There is one danger concerning which we do well to be on our guard, *the danger of evading this plain issue* of the blunted edge. And perhaps we ministers are peculiarly exposed to it.

1. We may ignore the question of edge, and *rely upon our holy office*. Are we not ordained ministers, set apart to the work, and raised to a lofty plane by our very Orders? Is not special grace offered to us? Certainly. But it is also true that "the corruption of the best is the worst," that the more privileged we are the larger the responsibility, that the greater the work we are called to the keener and sharper the edge should be. Even the Almighty power of God cannot support and empower a careless, undevotional, pleasure-loving minister. God is faithful, but what if *we* are faithless? And is not this necessary diligence recognized at our very ordination? We recall the question, "Will you be diligent in prayers, and in reading of the holy Scriptures, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same, laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?" "I will endeavour myself so to do, the Lord being my helper"—that is, I will keep the edge sharp by God's sharpening power.

2. And just as we may rely without warrant on the grace of the Office, so we may evade the necessity of edge by *quoting the Church's dictum as found in the Twenty-sixth Article*, "Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders all the effect of the Sacrament." But if we did fall back on this fact we should be guilty of great meanness, for, in the first place, it was not written for the benefit of an unspiritual minister, but for the perplexed congregation, and, in the second place, it does not meet the distressing fact that the people's spirituality rises or falls with

their ministers' experiences and condition. Our pulse and theirs beat in unison, and as we sink in spirituality so are they likely to do. It is one of the dire penalties of an edgeless ministry that it blunts the congregational edge too. The level of the ministry is the level of the people.

3. Then we are *driven to create substitutes* for the lack of spiritual edge, and the history of the Church is the history of these devices.

We may, for instance, *substitute quantity for quality*, and enlarge our organization in all directions, forgetting that the larger the organization the more need there is of the spiritual content. If we have not life enough for a little body, how can we possibly run a larger body on the same modicum of it?

We may *endeavour to make up for spirit-power by more physical energy*, by more clatter and noise, as in our preaching, when the chill is prominent within, we are apt to shout the louder. But perspiration is not inspiration.

We may be *tempted to attract the masses by appealing to the eye, or the sentiment, or the fancy*, and we may succeed in attracting them. But, having done this, what have we achieved? Spiced religion is not the best of fare, inasmuch as in the process religion itself may vanish. Music is a glorious adjunct to worship, but we have to remember that it is quite possible to drown the voice of God in it.

There is a delicacy about our Christian faith which demands gentle handling, and the bloom of it may go if we imitate the loud methods of the world, its exaggerations, its gaudy advertisements, its clamorous touting.

We may be *driven to actual unfaithfulness* by our lack of edge, minimizing the Word of God by preaching on poets or pictures, stooping to low-level subjects, and ignoring the message which we promised to declare.

All this is a plain confession of edgelessness, the effort to make up for lack of life by imitations of life, by graceless contortions.

It is well to be on our guard concerning these powerless substitutes for edge, for, however little *we* may be likely to use them, the spirit of evasion is in the air, and may as easily attack us as others.

The most perfect protection is *to be* what we seem, to rely on God-given weapons, to sharpen the edge of our souls until they cut clean and true, and to be so fully in the hands of our God that He may be able to use us for His own glory.



The Parable of the Unjust Steward.

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THE so-called Parable of the Unjust Steward has always seemed one of the most difficult of our Lord's parables. As to many features of the story, commentators have been more than usually emphatic in reminding us that we must not expect to find an application of every detail. But not only are particular points obscure in themselves, as well as in their interpretation, but there is such a strong apparent contrast between the conduct of an unfaithful steward and the lesson of faithfulness which seems to be based upon it, that doubt has been felt even as to the main lesson suggested, and the kind of Divine prudence inculcated has been taken in a very different way from what might at first be supposed.¹ A good deal of uncertainty may arise from our ignorance of the exact powers and responsibilities of a steward (*οἰκονόμος*), and of how much might be left to his discretion in fixing terms and conditions. In default of clearer knowledge, we must follow the leadings of the story as we find it. Perhaps the difficulties are partly of our own making. In trying to shake ourselves free from assumptions, we are not ready to go far enough. Perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that the steward was unjust after all!

¹ *E.g.*, by Latham in "Pastor Pastorum."