

Clubs and Institutes.

AT first sight, this may not seem a very pressing subject, while parishes are so depleted of men and every energy is bent upon the war. But a moment's reflection will show that at any time it may take its place among the most pressing. It is now permissible to *hope* that the final phase of the war has been reached, and before long the problem of dealing with the returning men may assume gigantic proportions. Clubs and institutes have always presented complicated perplexities in parochial organization, and these may soon have to be faced in an aggravated form. Those who are oppressed by ever-growing machinery, who cry out for the old simplicity of Gospel preaching and visitation, with time for unhurried prayer and study, who declare that spiritual life is crushed by the burden and rush of secondary aims, will then face afresh the seemingly unanswerable argument that it is a crime to leave any stone unturned while vast masses of both sexes are obviously beyond the pale of ordinary Christian ministrations, and while our own young people, with their many-sided needs, are liable to be led into temptation if we do not provide scope for their legitimate desires under Christian auspices.

Where equally earnest men differ so widely, it is evident that the subject is beset by no ordinary difficulties. The war and the National Mission have taught us all to examine our foundations *de novo*. It will help us most if we can once more approach the question with an open mind. No doubt we are between Charybdis and Scylla. The whirlpool of modern Church life has certainly tended to become a maelstrom of frenzied and fevered attempts to do the work of Christ in ways quite opposed to His own principles. But upon the other side of the narrow strait frowns the rock which threatens to wreck not only the ship we are trying to steer but also the lives that are in it, for lack of some reasonable precautions which common sense might have suggested. The matter is not to be settled with a wave of the hand by either section of opinion. Anybody faced with the problem of the masses is bound to give it prayerful attention; nor can he escape the responsibility of some sort of decision.

Once more, local circumstances differ so greatly that general

conclusions are most difficult. Yet this need not prevent a genuine attempt to arrive at some *principles* of unmistakably universal application, of which no local circumstances can justify the breach ; and then, with bated breath, to venture upon an examination of *methods* with a view to discovering any possible general guidance in details. Let this be our aim on the present occasion. The title is as wide as possible, and will cover all the varied organizations which stand outside directly spiritual ministrations and aim at reaching both sexes at any age—young men's institutes, girls' clubs and guilds, athletic clubs, boys' brigades or bands, scout patrols, etc. etc. Some of these, indeed, present special problems of their own, into which we cannot now enter. For instance, some people have feared that lads' brigades may foster militarism, though recent experiences and future prospects may modify such opinions. Others have questioned whether in some branches of athletics the degradation of sport has not reached such a pitch that Christians cannot touch them under the conditions usually required. But we must leave such subdivisions of the subject.

i. Following the plan thus broadly laid down, we seek for *leading principles* first.

i. One of the most important is *a due sense of proportion*. Even those who are most careful about the main aim may unconsciously be betrayed into disproportion of effort. We do not speak just now of personal effort, but of the whole scheme of Church work. In places where so much time is spent upon the institutional side that more directly spiritual work is crowded out, something is plainly wrong. However earnest the intention, and however valuable in themselves may be those secondary and auxiliary matters which have often been so keenly pursued, it is obvious that to lay every stress upon them while providing no parish prayer-meeting, no prayer-groups, scanty Bible classes, and deficient opportunities for deepening spiritual life and quickening missionary enthusiasm, is not to put first things first. Somehow or other a truer proportion must be found.

ii. The next principle involves more complicated discussion, though it looks simple enough in itself. *The right kind of aim* must be rigorously maintained. Probably everybody would agree to this in the abstract ; but some of the most obvious truths easily degenerate into platitudes. We want to get down to the root of

things as we see them in actual working. However convinced we may be that this, for example, is our consistent rule of action, let us test it by one or two questions. For instance, what is to be the immediate object—to draw in outsiders or to bind together those that are within? Or, if it be contended that both are possible, which is to predominate? It may be quite possible to maintain a spiritual standard with the former as chief aim; but it is unquestionably more difficult. If in any congregation there are a number of young people who feel that some kind of social bond would be a source of strength, and who are already accustomed to spiritual ideas and associations, they will be quite content with a definitely Christian atmosphere and a definitely Christian element in their gatherings: in fact, if properly trained, they will prefer them. But if we are going to start with the idea of getting hold of “the man in the street,” all kinds of practical difficulties at once make their influence felt. We shall be warned not to be too “pronounced,” or we shall frighten away the men we want. Perhaps we shall salve our consciences after the manner of the chairman at a concert who opens with prayer and closes with the blessing, while sandwiched between is a programme in which even scandalous items may, without the closest watchfulness, obtrude themselves. So may our clubs and institutes have a spice of prayer or a flavour of Gospel thrown in timidly and (let us not deceive ourselves) often uselessly if not with actual harmfulness. Or perhaps we shall cut the knot by having no religious element at all. But reflection will show that this is likely to injure our own young people while the very ones we seek to reach despise us for our methods. The world is not so easily hoodwinked. Young men may come and get all they can of enjoyment out of the Church’s athletic clubs and other organizations; but the very fact that these are recognized as baits will make them wary of spiritual approach. Another consideration is that the Church cannot compete with the world as a worldly entertainer. If this is all that is wanted, such fare as we can provide will soon seem insipid and feeble, and something more professional and better done (in its own way) is all too likely to be sought, even by some of our own people in whom we may ourselves have created a craving for it. Outsiders, too, will chafe under restrictions; and without restrictions where will our own young people be?

“But,” some one may say, “all this is very selfish. Do you

mean that we are to teach our young people to shut themselves up in smug security, singing their hymns and reading their Bibles, with not a thought for the tempted multitudes outside? " By no means. All that is meant is this—keep up the standard required for the training and help of young Christian people, and bid them to welcome and seek for all the outsiders they can get to join them *on these perfectly fair and open terms*. An illustration may be found in all properly managed Mission Colleges in India or China. It is understood that Bible instruction and Christian influence are the leading aims. Heathen and Mohammedan parents know this before they consent to their children's attendance. Everything is open and above-board. And the notable thing is that it does not prevent them from coming in large numbers !

Another question may test this matter of *aim* still further. What are we really after? Numbers or souls? Glory for our Master or fame for our Church as a popular and flourishing concern? Prosperous institutions or even crowded churches only, or converted souls and spiritual life? In the main, we get what we want, if we seek it on lines adapted to the aim. A certain class may be drawn within the four walls of the institute, or perhaps even of the Church, without being drawn a step nearer to Christ. And all the while a quieter sort, who might be won by more direct work, which is crowded out or timidly shunned, may be alienated by the element thus introduced. I am not speaking in generalities. I have a definite case in mind—an institute which began on quiet and humble lines, and, as I have been assured, was then a help to the young men attached to the Church. When I knew the parish later, more ambitious ideas had prevailed; questionable methods were in vogue; division and ill-feeling were caused, and the quieter men were driven out by the noisy element which they disliked. At one time that institute was a thorn in the side of the man who was responsible for it. Nor did outward evidences suggest that any were brought into really effective touch with Christian life by the policy adopted. If they had been, the matter might have seemed more open to debate.

The study of the methods of the Master compels the conviction that something is unsound in modern plans of campaign. His aim was always quality rather than quantity. He showed that it was better to have a handful of true disciples whose influence could

permeate with spiritual power the untouched masses than to attract a rabble of professed followers whose carnal ideals could only degrade His Name and render impotent His whole purpose. He actually sifted out the unreal by deliberate and searching tests ; and thereby, we may be quite sure, He attracted a larger number of real disciples than we do by fearing to make the test too searching. No wonder, then, that visible failure so often goes hand in hand with intricate machinery, and that even where there seems to be success, the uneasy sense of failure may lurk in the shadow of it.

The ideal of the Christian Church emphasizes the point. It does not exist to make this life pleasant, but to build up its members in the full exercise of spiritual life and influence here, and in preparation for a fuller life to come, while as regards outsiders it is to " witness "—and to witness in the power of the Holy Ghost. How does our Church machinery answer that test? Many things in themselves quite innocent may clearly be outside the Church's sphere—much more those which are dubious.

Moreover—to conclude this rather long discussion of general aims—results confirm the above conclusions. Which are the churches that are doing the most valuable work in winning young men and women to Christ, and where these form the largest proportion, not only at the Lord's Table and in the pews, but also among the ranks of workers? Are they not precisely those in which spiritual aims are really predominant? The most direct methods are the most successful, as they are also the most open. And even where large numbers are not definitely won—as they often are—we shall anyhow get *a few* by direct (though tactful) approach, even if it be, as our Lord Himself found, only a few. But we shall get none at all *to any real purpose* by any other means, however appearances may conceal the fact. A young man knows perfectly well when he is treated like a man, and not like a weakling who can be caught for spiritual ends by the pretext of worldly means. In fact, many may scorn this kind of treatment, even when the scorn is unexpressed or perhaps only subconsciously felt. But, if treated like a man, he may learn that true spirituality is the most manly thing on earth, and may come, by proper training and nourishment, to manifest it himself to the world.

iii. We can be briefer this time. "*Spiritual men for spiritual work*" is another of those maxims which are in danger of losing force

through sheer familiarity. And vital though its force really is, it is nowhere more commonly disregarded than in these matters. It is so great a relief to find *anybody* who will undertake onerous work like this that one is tempted to commit it to anybody's hands. There is even the further danger of thinking a high standard not so necessary in what is not so directly spiritual, or of viewing such work as an opportunity of drawing in helpers who would not undertake more direct tasks. Where there are the elements of sympathy with the main ideals, this latter argument may, with caution, be allowed some weight, at any rate with reference to subordinate offices. But the former one looks like giving the whole case away. For it looks as if, whatever our professions as to the aim of this side of work, it is not after all viewed as vitally connected with spiritual purposes; and there is nothing else with which Christian workers, as such, have any concern. Where there is tacit admission of a low ideal, where workers are out of sympathy with spiritual aims and therefore impotent for spiritual influence, can it be wondered that failure so commonly marks these efforts? The main defence of institutional work is its opportunity for a definite Christian atmosphere and for personal spiritual influence. What kind of atmosphere or influence can possibly go with agents who have no personal experience of either?

iv. This introduces us to one of the greatest problems in the whole subject. For, as our final principle, we must emphasize that *this is the work of laymen*. What was said before in general terms upon the question of due proportion applies with even greater force when considered particularly with reference to the duties of the ordained ministry. For, as far as the *details* are concerned, this is not the work of the ministry at all. Supervision and personal contact are a different matter; and we will return to this. But, from however high motives the clergy may suffer themselves to be involved in the machinery, it is with fatal results to their proper calling—especially the work of study and prayer and preparation, and of regular visitation—and often with fatal results also to patience and temper, worn by the constant friction of petty details, with resulting occasions of stumbling and offence. Those who are responsible for the highest of callings, which in itself places as much strain as anything else upon the physical and nervous system, have no rest for quiet spiritual refreshment, and are breaking down right

and left under a burden which even Apostles could not bear. The quotation of Apostolic example is by some of these good workers somewhat resented : one suspects that they think the term " serving tables " has ceased to be applicable because it is somewhat hackneyed. " Don't quote Acts vi. to me," said an earnest man ; " it's one of my favourite passages "—or words to that effect. Yet he certainly did not apply it to his own pet organization ! And there may be others like him—who see, presumably, the danger of becoming overwhelmed with secondary issues, but have some favourite exception in their own parish. Surely there is no more proper application of the principle than here ! The Apostles found that certain truly Christian and even necessary but not primary duties were likely to endanger their faithfulness in their own peculiar calling of prayer and ministry of the Word, or at any rate that these duties called for the appointment of others because they could not cope with both tasks. We are certainly not capable of doing more than inspired Apostles. We *must* get rid of it at all costs. Time is short ; and no man can do everything. The National Mission should at least have taught us to put our own special vows in their right place.

People laugh at any attempt to illustrate this in detail by transferring the Apostles, in imagination, to our own day. Circumstances are so different, they tell us, that it is impossible to say what they would have done, and it is therefore foolish to picture St. Paul or St. John presiding over a smoking concert, or drilling boys' brigades. We will therefore abstain from pressing the point ; yet it seems apposite to remark, in view of the fact that principles are eternal howsoever circumstances may alter, that if such pictures give a mental shock it may be wise to ask ourselves the real reason, and not be too confident that it is merely the result of the very different conditions of our age. We purposely avoid suggesting any more extreme examples than the above, because the present point is not the danger of importing doubtful elements of attraction but of diverting the clergy from their proper calling. Many of these things may be excellent work for a layman to do ; and we must somehow find the laymen to do them. Meanwhile, as was briefly suggested before, the ordained man need not, and indeed should not, hold himself aloof. All such work ought to be conducted in such a manner that he may find in it a useful means of personal

and spiritual intercourse with his own people. He ought to be frequently on the spot and moving amongst them: but that is a different thing from being personally responsible for petty details of machinery.

The problem of an adequate supply of laymen has in the past been the great *crux* of this question. Not merely the problem of a sufficient supply numerically but, as we have seen, a supply of the right kind of men. Not merely, again, a supply to start with, but one sufficient to maintain the work as years go by. There is undeniably a tendency for anything which cannot be otherwise provided for to fall upon the ordained man, and a work initiated under satisfactory conditions may by imperceptible degrees be laid upon him. But this great difficulty ought certainly to be lessened in the future. We claimed that the National Mission roused the Church, even if it has not so far roused the nation. Here is the opportunity for the Church layman to prove that it has roused him, by taking up exactly the work which calls for his activities. The war, again, ought surely to provide us with some awakened workers from the Front, who will devote a consecrated life to the welfare of lads and men when they are happily back amongst us once again. So may it be, if the Lord tarry!

2. It is not now possible to discuss *methods* anything like so fully. And perhaps it is scarcely so necessary, because much of what has been said already involves certain practical conclusions as to methods. But a few special points should not be omitted.

i. What is the best way of ensuring *the definitely religious element*? The whole work, under the principles already discussed, will partake of a religious character. But "spiritual atmosphere" and phrases of a similar kind (some of which have been already considered), while sounding very delightful, have a way of lending themselves to a real evasion of the one thing needful. Under the cloak of a general phrase, effective spiritual influence may be practically *nil*. In consideration for weak human nature, something more is called for. And first of all, some definitely religious conditions of membership. The worst degradation of athletic clubs and other parochial institutions is the presence of outsiders who have no connection whatever with the Church and do not mean to have any. The Church is then nothing but a stalking-horse. Some condition of attachment to religious observances is called for—perhaps attendance at a special

Bible Class—only let it be *in addition to* regular worship and not a substitute for it, as if worship were of no great account. And it is of the utmost importance that all such rules should be rigorously enforced. Too often they are a dead letter, for fear of losing members, or even weakening a cricket club in its league engagements! All this illustrates a difficulty already considered, into which we shall surely plunge ourselves if we begin to angle for the outsider *on any terms but our own*.

How far every gathering should be accompanied by prayer or an address is a matter which must be decided according to requirements. Certainly it is often advisable; certainly it should be done sometimes if not always; and certainly nothing should be admitted which would make it seem out of place if not hypocritical. On the other hand, this should never be allowed to appear in the light of the pill which is gilded by a certain amount of physical or mental enjoyment, and swallowed to secure that. In a word, let the religious element be a *real and natural and necessary* part of the whole organization. And do not let workers neglect their very special opportunities for *direct personal dealing*. These constitute the chief argument for institutional work.

ii. The general *maintenance of discipline* needs a word, not only for the sake of the special religious aims, but for the outward success of the organizations themselves. Young people are not a bit the less happy for being kept in order. In fact, a "rowdy" element will ruin not only the work, but the happiness of the other members. There are, however, two ways of doing things; and a tactless disciplinarian may do more harm than good. In nothing more than in this work do we need so much of the love and wisdom of Christ—except perhaps in the Sunday School; and many of us probably regret mistakes in these matters more than in anything else. But it *is* possible to maintain order, and to do it strictly, without repelling any, and so as to secure the respect of all and the advantage of the whole undertaking.

iii. Can anything at all be said about *matters of detail*? Clearly not much, where so many branches come under our title, each with its separate problems. But it would be foolish to gloss over the fact that some of them have caused great heart-searchings. What about cards and billiards, for instance? The former are often excluded where the latter are allowed: but some would include

both. It may be impossible logically to define wherein the difference lies between these and other games. Their advocates may be able to produce crushing superiority in argument. Yet why is careful supervision an acknowledged necessity? And even then private settlements cannot be prevented altogether. Nobody ever fears private settlements after chess, or suggests the need of supervising draughts. Whatever the logic, the facts are therefore plain. In view of the convictions of many earnest and good men of considerable experience, it is difficult to press the objection so strongly in the case of billiards as in that of cards. Yet the writer can never forget a young fellow who lapsed from the apparent promise of an earnest partaker in definitely spiritual work to the position of a perfectly hardened criminal, with repeated terms of imprisonment. It is quite likely that other influences would have brought about this fearful result in any case: but it is an undoubted fact that one of the pronounced early symptoms of his downfall was a mad craving for billiards, and the sting of the story is the further fact, apparently well established, that he had never seen the game till he joined a certain Church Institute. And even if others are able to produce cases of souls definitely helped by the permission of billiards, the teaching of Scripture about stumbling-blocks would seem to require more weight to be attached proportionately to one such case of offence.

Dances and theatricals are other causes of dispute: and the latter of them is a term needing definition which it is not possible to give without prayerful consideration of many perplexing details. We can suggest no more now upon such points, or others which may arise, than is necessarily covered by the principles with which we began. But in closing, it may be permissible to reiterate the conviction that in spiritual matters, spiritual methods are the only open methods; and they are likely moreover to be the most successful, if not as the world measures success, yet after the Master's standard, and as related to eternal issues. . . .

God will guide in method and enable in practice where His guidance and grace are faithfully sought. Direct, prayerful, spiritual, patient and painstaking dealing in these institutions will meet with its certain reward and crown.

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