

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Lessons from Chaplaincy Work.

BY A TEMPORARY CHAPLAIN.

DURING the last two strenuous and anxious years few topics have been more popular than the alleged "failure of the Church." The charge, as usually made, is quite a general one. Those who make it rarely condescend either to particulars or proofs. In regard to this charge one may suggest with a large measure of truth, first, that general charges, especially if unsupported by definite evidence, are not always widely true; secondly, that if any charge is made sufficiently often, and with sufficient boldness, those who listen to it may gradually, even without any real reason, come to believe in its truth.

I am not going into the charge as a whole. What I would suggest is this: that any period of exceptional stress or strain must reveal weak places in both individuals and societies. The medical wards of our War Hospitals offer thousands of proofs of the first. Is there any single national constitution in Europe which during the last two years has not shown some evidence of the second?

Wise people learn from these experiences, and they try to amend and strengthen what has been found wanting. The war has certainly revealed several weak places in the Church's work which, if we are wise, we shall try to strengthen and improve. All I would do now is to try to point out two or three of these. In what I have to say I will draw entirely from personal experience, from knowledge gained absolutely at first hand. Before doing this let me say very briefly how this knowledge has been acquired.

Since the war opened there have been very few weeks in which I have not addressed one or more parade services with congregations varying from seventy-five to 850 men. During the last two years, as senior chaplain of a large War Hospital—in which the number of sick and wounded has gradually risen from 350 to 1,500—I have sat by the bedsides of some thousands of these men. For the last eighteen months I have also been chaplain of a Military Prison or Detention Barracks, holding from 110 to 120 men, and almost always full. It is with my experiences in this last that I would specially deal. Probably eighty to eighty-five per cent. of these men are registered as members of the Church of England, though the real

number of Churchmen is much less. With each one of these men I have at least two private interviews, with some of them more. Though before taking up this work I had worked for more than thirty years in six large parishes, besides being both a hospital and a prison chaplain, I must confess that through these private interviews I have learnt more in at least one direction than in the whole course of my previous experience.

The inmates of a Detention Barracks are a strangely mixed crowd. I have come across almost every variety, from the lowest type of the wastrel and casual labourer, up to the public school boy and young professional man.

A large proportion are charged with military offences—from being late on parade, or asleep when on duty, or being absent without leave, up to actual desertion. Besides these there are those charged with intemperance, obscene language, assault, and various forms of theft. It must, of course, be remembered that the army now contains a very considerable proportion of the male criminal population between the ages of eighteen and forty-one years.

For my present purpose I would divide the whole of these men into two classes: first, those under, and then those over, twenty-five years of age. The vast majority of the younger men or boys (for many of them are but lads) are in simply for various breaches of discipline. Of the older men I fear that quite a large proportion would have come into the hands of the civil as they have come into the hands of the military police.

It is with the younger men I now propose to deal. The first thing I try to do in dealing with young men either in the Barracks or the Hospital is to get some conception of their home life, of their "bringing up." Then I often talk to them of their school days, of their experiences both in day and Sunday school, also about their work, their interests, companionships, and the way they have spent their leisure time. From those under twenty-five years of age I always try to get definite answers to the following questions: (1) Whether they ever have been and still are total abstainers; (2) whether they have been confirmed; (3) whether they have been at any time accustomed to say their prayers, and whether they still continue to do this. (These inquiries are not in order of "importance," but in order of difficulty.)

(1) I have been more than agreeably surprised by the very large

number of men, at any rate under twenty years of age, who are abstainers. Generally I get to know where and when they took the pledge. In most cases it has been at some Band of Hope in their early boyhood; occasionally it has been at some Y.M.C.A. tent. No one can exaggerate the good that has been done by our little Bands of Hope. In connection with these a few earnest humble-minded men and women, often in some small school or mission room in the back streets of our great towns, have done an inestimable service, not only to thousands of young men and women, but to the nation as a whole. Here let me point a moral: they have aimed at a single concrete object or purpose about which they have been perfectly clear, and they have in large measure achieved it.

(2) With regard to Confirmation, the result has been far different. It is difficult to give statistics, and these, if given, would be vitiated by the large number of men who register in the Army as "Church of England" without having any connection whatever with the Church. Roughly speaking, I should be inclined to say that of those who might be regarded as belonging to the Church one in three state that they have been confirmed. One cannot always accept a lad's affirmation on the subject. On one occasion I was assured it was so, but that "it was at a Gospel Hall and certainly not by a Bishop." In answer to the preliminary question, "Have you been confirmed?" I have scores of times had such replies as: "What is that?" or "I don't understand what you mean," or "I don't think I have," or "I was once, but it was a long time ago, when I was a child." I have several times had such answers from choir boys, and dozens of times from boys who had been for several years in Church Sunday schools, to say nothing of Church day schools. Does not this indicate one failure on the part of the Church? I have my own views of the Sunday school, viz., that it is a part of the Church's organization with a very definite function: to prepare the baptized children of the Church to discharge the duties and responsibilities of Church membership. Regarded from the human point of view, Confirmation is, or should be, the Church's declaration that those who present themselves have been so intelligently instructed in these duties that they are fit to discharge them. A Sunday school is not a place in which only to tell Scripture Stories, or to describe Jewish customs, or to give instruction on the history, geography, zoology or botany of Palestine. What we need is

far more clear, simple, definite teaching about the really important things. I rather dread the word "spiritual," but in its true sense, of dealing with forces and the relationships created by forces, we want far more spiritual teaching. Our teaching must be far more practical, that is, more definitely applied to the ordinary matters of the everyday life and the actual circumstances in which young people find themselves at the present time. Speaking from a long experience, I maintain that the most efficient Sunday school teachers I have ever known have been thoroughly earnest, spiritually-minded working men, who knew the home-life and the work-life, the difficulties and needs, of the boys they taught. Both in teaching and preaching I fear we have been far too much concerned with what interested ourselves, and not with supplying the real needs of those, we flattered ourselves, we were trying to edify. Again and again we have been told that the Germans have failed through their bad psychology: we have failed either from ignorance of or inattention to one of the most elementary of all psychological laws—that you cannot gain admission for an idea unless there is already something in the mind to which this idea can attach itself. We have used language which conveyed nothing to those to whom we addressed it. We have employed words and terms which had absolutely no meaning to them. Not one clergyman in ten, I believe, realizes that a very great deal of what he says to the ordinary working-class congregation is practically unintelligible to a large proportion of his hearers.

(3) In regard to prayer: it is much more difficult to get really definite and satisfactory evidence. One of the secrets of dealing with the soldier, and especially with the young soldier—who is only the ordinary young man in khaki clothes—is to remember that he is an extraordinarily shy person—how very shy one only realizes after long experience. It is very difficult to question any man on the contents of his prayers. You and I would strongly resent such an examination, and we must respect the feelings of others. But this I have certainly learnt, that in our Sunday schools we must pay far more attention towards teaching the children *how to pray*. We must teach them more frequently and more simply what prayer is. We must, as far as possible, teach them to pray in their own words. We must teach them that prayer is just "talking with God," and, as far as possible, we must teach them how God speaks to us through our conscience in answer to what we say to Him. We must teach

them that there is a listening as well as a speaking in prayer. We must show them that they can pray anywhere and at all times and under all circumstances. We must get them to form a habit of silent ejaculatory prayer. I have dwelt upon this subject at some length because I feel there is none which is more important. I have found the value, at any rate at small parade services, of at least one extempore prayer. I generally use this immediately after the address. The address has shown the need and the duty of doing certain things—of fighting against certain temptations, and of carrying out certain duties. The prayer consists of simple direct petitions for God's help, for His guidance and His strength, in connection with or in reference to these. During this prayer—some of my ancestors were Scotch Presbyterians—I find the attitude of standing far more conducive to both reverence and attention than that of kneeling.

Let me gather up very briefly a few of the reforms which personal experience convinces me are specially needed—

We must make all our teaching much more lucid, much more definite, and much more practical. We must show our hearers much more clearly how exactly to apply Christian truth and Christian principles to ordinary, everyday life.

We must go back much more frequently to the fundamental ideas of religion. The conceptions which many of our hearers have of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, and still more of the Holy Spirit, are terribly vague. Till we have absolute proof let us be profoundly sceptical that words convey ideas—

Denn eben wo Begriffe fehlen,
Da stellt ein Wort zur rechten Zeit sich ein.

We must be far more self-sacrificing in our teaching. We must think far less about what interests ourselves and far more about what is really needful to those we would teach.

So far I have dealt with what I have learnt from intercourse with the younger soldiers, in other words, with the ordinary young men of the working classes. I would now state very briefly what I have learnt from intercourse with the younger officers, that is, with the average young man of the so-called middle and upper classes of society. Here I admit that owing to circumstances my knowledge is much less extensive and much less directly personal; but I have acted as one of the officiating clergymen to four different divisions

—to one of these divisions for nine months and to another for six months ; also since the war opened I have had hundreds of these younger officers billeted in my parish. Necessarily I must speak in somewhat general terms, and to what I have to say I am thankful that there are many exceptions, but on the whole what I have learnt from these young men in regard to their attitude towards religion gives me cause for the gravest anxiety, indeed unhappiness. So far as I can judge, the average junior officer in our new armies takes very little interest in religion at all. Apparently he very seldom realizes what a help it might be to him in dealing with his men, and especially with the younger men.

Not long ago we heard much about the defects of public-school religion. Have we not at least some evidence of this here? I have no wish to bring any charges against these young men. What I regret is the apparently small place and small influence that religion has in their lives. I am compelled to doubt whether they have ever been taught its value and its power. I presume that most of them have been taught something of the contents of the Bible. They have learnt a certain amount of Scripture history. At school they must have attended the chapel services and listened to, or at least been present during, many sermons. What I surmise, indeed what I fear, is that religion has been regarded by them either as a branch of learning or as a custom. Bible and Greek Testament lessons and Scripture history have belonged to the category of more or less unimportant subjects. They have occupied a similar position to what modern languages and science occupied in the old classical schools. They were not regarded very seriously. Probably it was a rule of the house or of the school to have prayers daily and to have one or more "chapels" on a Sunday. This rule, like other rules, had to be obeyed, but I fear that the effect which these prayers ought to have had upon character was realized by comparatively few.

Where lies the seat of failure? I am inclined to go behind the public-school master. Unless he is quite an exceptional man he is much more of a channel or an instrument than a source. Like the great majority of men he simply transmits what he has assimilated or been taught. The religious knowledge which he imparts is very much what he received in his own school days and at the university. Thus he is to some extent the product of an evil tradition which is

apt to be handed on from generation to generation. This tradition, so far as I can see, can be broken in only one of two places : either in the home or the university. The influence of the home will act only in individual instances, and these, I fear, may be few and far between. The influence of the university, could it be brought to bear, would be far more general. Here, I am inclined to think, is the crux of the question : But how is it to be solved ? We might begin at the top—with the divinity professors. But their answer would be that their work is to teach theology, not to apply it. Theological learning does not necessarily imply spiritual or even Christian influence. Not every theological professor is a Westcott or a Maurice. Let us leave the theological honours men : few of them become public-school masters ; still fewer masters took a theological pass degree. There are the deans and the chaplains of Colleges. But these men, so far as I know, are rarely chosen because they exhibit exceptional power of spiritual influence.

The actual facts we have to face are as follows : the *power* of religion in life and conduct is not recognized by these young men ; God—and all that God should mean—is hardly “ in all their thoughts ” ; the infinite virtue and beauty and value of Christ’s character are not recognized ; the evil of sin, and the true means whereby sin may be conquered, are not understood, and this is so because these have not been explained with sufficient clearness.

What we need most of all is to raise up a body of teachers whose spiritual power and whose scholarship shall both be of the highest order. We must then, by every possible means, encourage such men to become schoolmasters. This will be most effectively accomplished by pointing out to them what a magnificent field of the widest influence for good will then lie open before them.

