

THE AGENT OF GOD.

SOME THOUGHTS ON HIS POSITION AND TRAINING.

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INTRODUCTORY.

THE principal purpose of the Christian ministry is the propagation of the Gospel. This mighty object might have been left to the "natural" production of spirit by spirit, but it was not. It seems little enough to expect every Christian to bring one other to Christ, yet even in the apostolic age this was not done. If it had been done the whole world would have been converted in thirty years. But "official" agencies were also appointed, and it is these which must be mainly responsible for the success or failure of the Christian Church. Unofficial agents have probably accomplished more than we know, but man cannot handle them. We are able to deal with the organized ministry, and thus it seemed advisable to reconsider its purpose and equipment in the light of the present, and as much as lieth in us with an open mind. The standpoint of the writer is that of the Church of England, but he has endeavoured to treat the subject with freedom, and with as little prejudice and preconception as possible. It was deemed well to be unhampered by practical considerations until assured of what was desirable. The means of realizing the ideal follow of necessity.

The use of a new term for the "official" minister was felt to be expedient, in order to lift the mind out of its old associations. The term "Agent" is chosen to denote all whose lives are to be devoted to the service of Christ, primarily those in preparation for the ministry, but also clergy generally. The word "servant" seems a fairly colourless synonym in connexion with the subject.

NEED OF ADAPTATION.

The late Bishop of St. Albans wrote, in reference to the freshness of Pastoral Theology, that "the conditions of life and work vary so greatly that the man who simply uses old methods, and fails to understand the generation in which He lives, will fail to touch

many who are capable of being won and converted into active workers for the Master." ¹

This is scientifically true. The life of any organism depends upon its power of adaptation to its environment. And adaptation is a biological necessity for human institutions, political and religious. The Church, which can only remain the Church of Christ by the conservation of its original spiritual principles, because they are its life, is yet dependent for its continuity upon the adaptability of its non-essential or external elements to the changing world in which it has to live. In so far as the Church awakens to this fact, and adapts, not its doctrine, which is Divine and hence eternal, but its human methods of propagating its beliefs, to the conditions which surround it, so far and so far only, will its life and usefulness continue and extend.

FUNCTION OF ORGANIZATION.

Turning back to the work of our Lord and His apostles we find the necessity for organization admitted, but only in strict subordination to the work of God in the souls of men, and obviously to this end, as matter is to spirit. And as most human affairs fail because they violate Divine order, so the Church is, and has ever been, in danger from the usurpation of its mechanical methods to a position of authority over the soul. The function of organization is in reality extremely limited. The world is not going to be saved by it. No political or religious organization can of itself do anything, its use depends entirely upon the spirit which animates it. The living force of Christianity is the Spirit of God. Human systems, however perfect at their inceptions, always fail somewhere, sooner or later. Hence it is futile to trust to them. But everything has its use, and if the Church is to make any arrangements whatever for carrying on its Divinely appointed mission, it should do so, under the guidance of God, by the full use of its reasoning powers. Then, after having given the fullest consideration to the subject, reliance should be placed not upon the work of its own hands, but upon Him who alone can give the increase.

PROVINCE OF PREPARATION.

Long ages before the creation of man his benevolent Creator was laying the foundations of the human habitation. The physical

¹ Preface to *The Pastoral Idea* (J. T. Inskip).

needs of the future occupants were being prepared in the carboniferous forests. While our spiritual necessities had been provided for, even in that "timeless state before the dawn of life," in the Lamb that was slain *before* the foundation of the world.

The need for careful preparation is in proportion to the importance of the ultimate work to be done. First must be found the means which are most likely to be suited to the execution of the work, and then the required instruments must be adequately prepared for their functions. The Church does not appear to have realized either the magnitude or the exact quality of the preparation necessary for properly carrying out its own work. Before a pianoforte, an engine, or a gun can be made, special tools have to be constructed, often large and intricate machines, with which to produce these or whatever objects are desired. And usually much greater skill, labour and time are required for the production of the tool than in the use of it, when made, for the manufacture of the finished article. When the proper tools are prepared the ultimate object is assured, and continuously so. Hence "toolmakers" or the engineers who make machines, etc., are the indispensable preliminaries to all manufacturing.

Furthermore, that which is finally produced depends entirely upon the species and quality of the tool and the character of the operator. But an ideal operator could not drill holes with a saw, or make a casting in a pattern shop. He must have exactly the implements which the work demands, and they must be good ones of their kind, if good work is to be produced. There is no greater fallacy, even among proverbs, than the one relating to bad workmen and their tools.

Transfer the illustration to its application. The work to be done is the building of the Temple of God, the material to be used is humanity, the Grand Architect is God. He has ordained that human workmen, endued with His Spirit, shall erect the sacred edifice. And He has amply shown how much preparation is required, and of what kind, in the Scriptures. The classical instance is Israel, the Servant of Jehovah, chosen, as is the Church, for the salvation of the world, or perhaps more correctly, as His witness to all men. Consider the selection of Abram, as one who would obey Him; note His patient training of that patriarch's character and that of his son, grandson and their children. The careful

forming of the individual to give the correct character to the race which was to serve Him. Consider Moses who was given eighty years' training for forty years' service. The first half of his preparation being among men and the second alone with God.

It is the same with all the agents whom God prepared, many years being spent in carefully fashioning His instruments for their appointed tasks. It is by no means a case where haphazard or empirical methods will do. To return to our illustrations; if so much care is requisite to prepare the instruments for producing merely inanimate objects, how much more must be necessary before an agent is fit to handle immortal souls? And if the result is to be regulated by the quality of the tool, what consideration can be deemed excessive if its object be to fashion the agent who is to control, humanly speaking, the destiny of the race? Agencies for training the agents of God are the tool-making establishments without which His Kingdom cannot be extended in this present age; and only in so far as they produce the right instruments can the blessed work be carried out. Once, however, the precise character of the work is ascertained and instruments are specifically formed for performing it, their utilization is a relatively simple matter. Not that the most perfectly prepared instrument never fails, but that it has no excuse for doing so; whereas an improperly prepared one is a blunt tool which cannot be expected to do its work. The failure of Israel, as the agent of God for the conversion of the world, was culpable on this account. And should the Church of Christ, God's new agent, likewise fail, would it not be even more blameworthy than Israel?

When God has had important work to be done by human agency we always find that He has gone to considerable trouble to prepare His instrument for it. Particular attention is directed to this, because the writer feels that our chief cause of failure lies just here. A certain course of mental training is assumed to be all the qualification required for our clergy, and the result is that the Church can hardly keep pace with a declining birth-rate. It is like a locomotive with insufficient power to move *its own* weight. At present we do not even consider the facts of the case, or the elements with which we have to deal. Too many indeed cannot even see their importance when they are pointed out to them, because their minds are not adjusted to the relative importance of relative facts. The

result of any adequate examination of the subject should be to see that the training at present given is not that which the case requires. As the quality of the work will be conditioned entirely by the quality of the agent, it is absolutely essential to find out what qualities are needed for the work of God among men. It must then be considered how these qualities may best be cultivated.

THE QUALITY OF THE AGENT.

Throughout the organic kingdom the character of each organ is found to have been formed strictly for the functions it is its business to perform. This should be the law of the spiritual kingdom also. The agency by which the Church is extended must be conditioned by the elements, human and divine, which are concerned. For the development of His kingdom among men in this age God has ordained human instruments, their nature being fixed by that of God and of man. This two-fold character of the agent of God is seen under ideal conditions in the blessed nature of our Saviour, who was perfect God and perfect man because both were essential for the reconciliation of God and man. It is encouraging to reflect that the need of being partakers of the divine nature has been maintained by the Church, at least in theory, in nearly all ages ; but the equal necessity of possessing a perfect and complete humanity is to this day almost entirely forgotten. The human side may not be so noble as the divine, but it is perhaps equally important in this matter of Christian service, from the nature of the case. Both are essential, correspondence with both environments, the spiritual and the material ; man's appointed place in the universe being under the rule of God yet set over the other works of His hands upon earth. The success of the agent, therefore, will depend upon both divine and human qualities. " But that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterwards that which is spiritual." The divine shoot is grafted upon the human stem, when root and stem, both works of God, have been remodelled according to His will.

THE HUMAN ASPECT.

On calling fishermen to follow Him our Lord promised to make them " fishers of men." Is it too much to assume that His agents should be such in all ages ? If not, and if they are to have

any human training for their work, it should surely be regulated by the character of the creatures to be caught. Men do not become fishers by learning how to shoot, nor by studying the habits of game but of fish. The fundamental need of the Christian agent on the human side, therefore, is knowledge of men. But what is man?

Man is primarily and principally an active agent, and nine-tenths of humanity are almost exclusively so. Their one great business is to live. Very few know *how* they live, or the part played by reason, emotion, or will; but this does not make any material difference, for their practical knowledge of life is quite sufficient for their purpose, and one might add for their happiness also. Dr. Illingworth bases his argument for the reasonableness of faith upon this fact, that man is made for action. Reason is the means, but living the end. And he points out that those who live by their dealings with men-in-the-concrete possess an intuitive knowledge of humanity which cannot be tabulated but which works in actual practice. It is by this practical knowledge that the great world of politics, commerce, finance, etc., is conducted. What of religion? Is it the great and only exception?

“Now Christianity . . . deals with man in the concrete, as an active agent who has to realize himself in the experience of life. And moreover it deals with him more completely in the concrete than any other influence can do, for it involves . . . his entire personality in all its relations . . . man in his entire context.”¹

The character of God's human agent should be nothing less than this; his personality must be complete in its “entire context.” He must correspond with the whole, and not merely with a part of his proper environment. He has the highest motive for doing so, the glory of his Master. On the Divine side he must preserve continuous communion with his God, and on the human side with his fellow-men. The former maintains his savour as salt of the earth, the latter uses it. Otherwise how can he expect to deal successfully with those for whose salvation he exists? If he is a “smaller man” than others, he can sway no influence over them, but on the contrary they have the advantage over him. He needs all the great qualities that make up complete manhood, and in particular he must have that indefinable, and characteristic-

¹ *Reason and Revelation.*

ally British, *practical ability*, because this is the one great faculty possessed by nearly all our countrymen. We are not an intellectual or artistic race as a whole, but men of action, the Romans of the modern world. The race which by its manly virtues and knowledge of human nature, by its opportunism and tact, has acquired a world-wide empire "in a fit of absence of mind" is the last in the world to be influenced very much by pure scholars or by any who are devoid of its great national characteristics. Without such it is impossible to handle the English for any purpose. The agent of God must be an entire man.

TWO STAGES IN TRAINING.

There should therefore be two well-defined stages in the preparation of the humano-divine agent. The first or foundation, is the making of the man.¹ Upon this the second part or superstructure of the agent proper should be built. Hitherto the Church officially has given no consideration whatever to the making of foundations. It has built upon whatever happened to exist, like a "shoddy" contractor. Sometimes it has chanced upon a firm subsoil, and frequently upon sand. The Church should do its work thoroughly, and after the manner of a competent engineer examine the ground, clear away rubbish, delve below the surface to test the character of the subsoil, and either select only suitable sites, or make them fit by deliberately constructing a substructure, massive if need be, certainly capable of bearing whatever weight may be placed upon it. An inferior man can never make a superior agent. And there is no natural or spiritual law which makes the saint a fool.

Shall we ever see that to get men into the Church its agents must be such as to appeal to those *outside*? The cultivation of human qualities is not derogatory, evil only excepted. The Master Himself first attracted men by His perfect sympathy and understanding of their lives. Our object is to reconcile men to God by showing them that *He* is reconciled to *them*. They do not know this, and they would not listen to angels. So God would send "men of like passions" with themselves, men who, like St. Paul,

¹ We are probably indebted to Bishop Phillips Brooks for this expression. But the conception has always appeared to the writer to be perfectly obvious.

can be "all things to all men" because like him they are also perfectly obedient to the Master's will.

During both stages of preparation the agent in formation must be kept from becoming unpractical. The besetting sin of the Church, as of the student class generally, has always been that of getting out of touch with actuality. So far has this gone that the human side is entirely ignored in the Church's official curricula, and on the divine side practical spiritual work is absolutely shelved for theoretical theology. But mental knowledge is of no use if disconnected from personal knowledge of humanity. Ninety per cent of the population are not students, yet we continue to do everything from the student's standpoint, and then wonder why we fail. The scholar's mental atmosphere is very delightful, above the dust and heat of the world's work, and it should by no means be an unknown region to the agent; he must be able to retire there for contemplation. But the world will not be won for Christ by looking down upon it, but by descending into its arena as our Saviour did. This involves self-sacrifice, but that is axiomatic to the true servant of God. The only way to win men is by understanding them and being able to give all the great facts of their lives their proper weight.

In some quarters it seems to be assumed that the public has suddenly become intellectual, and that hence the great demand of the hour is for men with modern book-learning and good university degrees. Such is not in agreement with the facts. The spread of what is politely termed "Education" is on the whole no more than that of the means by which the mind may be trained. And all honours men are not thinkers. A huge majority of mankind still have no real interest in intellectual matters. Thus a purely intellectual Christianity does more harm than good, for people cannot understand it, but they can see that it has little or no connexion with actual life, and as it is practical help they want, to enable them to live better lives, they soon get "bored" and remain away from church. On the human side, reason leads us to practical ends.

The Church should be truly Catholic in the sense of meeting the needs of "all sorts and conditions of men." At present it only provides for the insignificant minority of students who have a religious bias, and women largely attracted by its externals. We

actually forget that the gospel is for all men. Christ appeals to the great primary instincts of humanity in all ages. Now the decisive question with most men is "What is the use of it?" And they are perfectly correct, not only from the inexorable demands of life, but in undesigned accordance with the Sermon on the Mount, that action is the vital point, and that unpractical people are building upon sand which the storms of life will wash away.

The agent must not be a one-sided creature, but a good "all round man," with natural as well as spiritual faculties properly developed. Upon his "Gentile" foundation must be built the beacon-tower of a more than Hebrew witness for God. *Like* other men in human knowledge and sympathies, *unlike* others in being "separated unto the gospel of Christ." As far as possible knowing something of everything, and everything of the one thing needful. His general education and experience of men being the background upon which the result of his special training as God's representative among men, should stand boldly out. His natural affinity with man having its complement in his spiritual affinity with God. If, on the human side, man is primarily an active creature, on the Divine side he is above all a dependent spirit. And the secret of his most useful activity among men is his perfect plasticity in the hands of God.

(*To be continued.*)

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THE MASTER OF MAN. By Hall Caine. London: *Wm. Heinemann*.
6s. net.

Sir Hall Caine is a great writer and his books have a fascination, particularly to those who have some acquaintance with the quaint customs and peculiar atmosphere of the Isle of Man. His latest book gives a picture of the Island and its people which is intensely interesting, and it is published at 6s. net, an old-time price which it is a joy to encounter once again. But what does the author mean to convey to his readers? A moral undoubtedly, but what is it? Is it that no matter how one may sin, excusably or otherwise—and Sir Hall Caine does excuse his hero—that sin must come to light and must be atoned for? Certainly the author drives his hero into a veritable slough of despond, and gives the reader a wealth of detail which, to say the least, is not edifying. Sir Hall Caine is, however—Sir Hall Caine.