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

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

CLERICAL NERVES.

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A.

NOT that clerical nerves are different from others. As a matter of fact, dissect a Bishop and his butler, and their nervous systems will be found exact replicas of one another. But clerical nerves stand apart, because of the peculiar place they occupy in the clerical career. For one thing, a parson draws on them more largely, and depends on them more fully. Nothing plays so large a place in his life as nerves, and, like a bank balance, if they run out he is a pauper. Ordinary men call upon them occasionally; a clergyman is for ever turning the tap. They are the wires over which his emotions run. They are the basis on which rest his thoughts and ideas, for the brain is after all only a great mass of nerve matter. For another thing, nerves are more in evidence with the parson. Nerves reveal the man more than any other part of him. He, of all men, wears his nervous system inside out. In his preaching, in his visiting, in his conduct of public prayer, the nerves are the man mostly. Absent nerves spell woodenness. It is by virtue of his nervous system that he under the Holy Spirit arrests the minds of men and speeds a living message. And as he stands up before his people they read the man more by his tones than by his features or his words.

By nerves too the clergy stand or fall. If the nerves fail the parson, all the man is chained and tied in knots. No man does justice to himself if his nerves are all over the place. Then he loses his self-mastery and, like an actor struck with stage fright, memory goes, words fail him and his knees shake beneath him. So far from being self-possessed he possesses nothing. Every thing of value speeds away. Sydney Smith never said a truer thing than that a great deal of talent is lost to the world for lack of a little courage. A nervous preacher is like a musician trying to play on a slack string or with frozen fingers. It is sad to think that so small a thing should unhinge a minister of Christ, and that a great intellect, a loving heart, and a mastery of religious lore should all be wasted for want of nerve. Yet, so it is. There are able men on the shelf to-day, working in the shade, who but for this unhappy failure would be on the Bench of Bishops and swaying multitudes.

There are golden-mouthed men who are tongue-tied because nervousness has smitten them as winter frost the running stream. Many are content to read from laboured manuscripts, who but for this deadly embargo might launch out on the joys of extempore speech. There are stores of sympathy lying idle because of the icy barriers of nervous fears and the dread of letting themselves go. Warm hearts are misjudged and dubbed cold because of the reserves which are born of nerves. The councils of the church are made barren by the pressure upon them of loud-mouthed, self-assured men and because the real brain and heart of the church are locked up by this paralysing nervousness. Your coarse-grained man of the world, with a brow of brass, does not understand this phenomenon of want of nerve, and piles his charges against the unhappy victims. To him they are dumb dogs, unsociable, silent from pride, and a hundred other unpleasant things. I think that in some future world such men may be made to taste the bitterness of nervousness. They will understand then.

It is in the face of such a condition of things as this that I am venturing to discuss the clerical nerve. If I can say one helpful thing, or point out one alleviation, I shall feel well repaid.

I

Our first inquiry must needs be WHY THE NERVES GO WRONG.

In many cases nerves are born so. They are inherited like the family estates. Nerves in the father or mother, or both, will probably mean a too nervous offspring. This natural fact of inheritance is one of the saddest and most inevitable aspects of life. It has to be accepted like the family nose and the family gout. But nature must not shoulder the whole burden. Nerves are also made. And this is a sadder chapter still. For many have come into the world with a splendid equipment of nervous energy, and have squandered the whole by sheer mismanagement. Men often forget what frail things nerves are, and press them beyond their strength. As when heavy weights are put on thin wires their nerves bend and snap. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, it is true, and therefore we must be fearfully and wonderfully careful. There are many men and women who take more care of their watch than they do of their nerves. There is no greater wear and tear in life than that of the nerves, and none

which exacts such fearful penalties. A broken leg or tendon you can get mended, but when the nerves are strained to breaking point there is no easy repair.

I do not speak now of those physical sins which wreck the nerves, such as overdrinking and sensuality, for I am writing for parsons.

The danger is not so much from this side as from the highly moral and spiritual side. A zealous clergyman, with the responsibility of souls heavy upon him, labours and labours to escape the blood taint of neglect. Night and day he gives himself no rest ; summers pass and he takes no holiday ; he frets himself for work undone when time and strength fail him ; recreation appears to him unfaithfulness ; social claims are repudiated in the interests of the parish ; and then he drops. Of course he does. He is not made of cast-iron, and his nerves are not made of gutta-percha, and once past the safety point he loses control and runs down hill, a mass of nervous wreckage. If the poor victim is surprised, nobody else is. But there is not only general overwork, there is also particular nerve strain. Emotion in full flood drains away the nervous energy and leaves men stranded. The nerves are the worst possible things to strain, for they kick back with woeful results. It is good to be zealously affected in a good thing, but you must ride your zeal with a curb as well as a snaffle to keep it from bolting. Vagrant habits, too, are responsible for much nervous breakdown, because they involve unnecessary strain. Thus, one man will turn night into day, and deprive himself of sleep to achieve the work which ought to have been done in the daytime. He will even boast of the few hours he requires for sleep. He does not suspect himself of playing the fool and preparing for a breakdown before long. Another will waste the week-days and attack his Sunday sermons on a Saturday night. In a violent hurry he has to choose his text, gather his thoughts together, write like a press-man, and then go to bed to toss there from side to side, trying in vain to woo sleep. I have known men boast of that feat. The result is that they serve up a hash to their patient congregation, and by and by collapse. They call their nervous prostration the result of overwork. They would do better to call it the certain effect of pure disorderliness. There is nothing heroic here ; simply folly. Many men are daily playing tricks with their bodies which appear harmless enough until the nerves go wrong. Touch the

body harmfully, indulge in habits which are against physical good, and you are making straight for damaged nerves. It is quite possible to fast yourself into nervousness, to smoke yourself into nervousness, to eat yourself into nervousness, and many men do just these things. The body is not our enemy, but our friend, and body and soul stand or fall together.

The trouble is that men will not recognize warning symptoms, and for want of noting these they make matters worse. Restlessness bespeaks nerves in disorder. Discontent, too, tells the same tale. Undue sensitiveness to unfriendly criticisms is a pretty sure sign of disordered nerves, for when the nerves are sane and sound opposition is simply disregarded. Difficulties, too, loom larger than usual when the nerves are on an edge, and seem more insurmountable. We are more disposed to make mountains of mole-hills, and to worry over our work when we are strained and nervous. Anxieties multiply under nervous invasions. Nothing seems to go right under this stress, and we write ourselves down as dismal failures. Our sermons are of the poorest, and our efforts in all directions are worse than useless. Perhaps, however, the worst symptom is irritability of temper. Vexed with ourselves, we get vexed with all who come in contact with us. We become hard to live with, and home turns into a small pandemonium.

How does the ordinary man treat these grave symptoms? He mostly ignores them or he fights them. He turns the wheels of his machinery at a quicker pace, and instead of taking his irons out of the fire pushes them further in, multiplying their number at the same time. And so the malady grows, and the poor nerves, pressed beyond endurance, take their revenge. Not only does he ignore these warnings, and go full steam ahead, but he sets them down to the wrong causes. This depression, this morbid sense, this fear are, he thinks, just trials sent of God to prove and better him. Or they are a temptation of the devil to interfere with and stop his work. They must therefore be fought and beaten down. Or they are just passing things to be worked off. And so the tangle grows, and the case turns from being simply distressing to being malignant. Anything may happen from this mad treatment. And the worst often does happen. Naturally, an Englishman, much more a Christian minister, does not like to give in; all the traditions of his race and order forbid it. But desperate ailments require

desperate remedies. It is only false shame which leads a man to go over the precipice rather than turn back. That a wounded man is carried to the rear is no reflection on the man ; it is the action of the level head and the bold heart. It is the acceptance of the inevitable. And even if he does not like it he is carried back all the same.

II

I will next point out *some considerations* which a nervous man will do well to take to heart. I think they will help to cut the roots of much of the insane overstrain of the clergy and Christian workers generally.

The first is that God is not likely to work His servants to death. I set it down in plain black and white, because some men seem to fancy that they are doing God's will all the better for fuss and fury. To me nerve strain is the voice of God bidding me stop. It is God's warning ; not His voice of approval. I have no more right to break one of God's natural laws than I have to break one of the Ten Commandments. To imagine that all this pressure is pleasing to God is to set Him down as a slave-driver at once.

The second consideration is that we can well be done without, if necessary. It is a foolish fiction that we are indispensable. And so all this strain, like an Atlas bearing up the world, is purely unnecessary. The time is coming when we shall have to be done without, and then it will be seen that our disappearance has not caused anything like the wide gap that we thought. There are as good fish in the sea as any that have come out of it, and there are as good parsons rising above the horizon as those who are setting like the sun in the west, and dipping below. For forgetfulness of this we see old men hanging on to their parishes under the impression that after them is coming the Deluge. When Elijah went up to heaven the Israelitish world went on very well with an Elisha.

The third consideration is that God can only use us so long as we are usable. And as a rule we are only usable so long as we are in possession of our powers of mind and body. Now your nervous man is incapacitated for much of his usual work because his broken nerves bar much active and public service. Therefore to run oneself into nervous strain and disorder is to qualify for a back seat in the earthly kingdom. God can use a broken reed, but He can

do better with one that is unbroken or made as good as new by mending. I say this not to dishearten the nervous, but to warn them, and get them to put the drag on in time.

The fourth consideration is that all success is God's work, not man's. It is not the quantity of a man's work that tells, but the quality of it. God can do as much with a half-time man as He can with a whole-time man. In these days of multiplied services, with every hour of the day occupied, until there is hardly time to get a meal or to breathe comfortably, does it not seem as if the parson is hugging to himself the false idea that when he stops the work will collapse? Not a bit of it, my friend. It is God that gives the increase, remember, and if you could manage to do less, and do it better, God's increase would not be less, but more. Cut your garment according to your cloth, cut your work according to your strength, and cut down your organization as much as possible. Then leave the rest to God. So would nerve and work be both the better.

Another consideration that will be beneficial to our overworking nerve victim is that it is a better thing to work under Spirit pressure than at high pressure. All your high pressure will not turn a single wheel, nor manufacture a single blessing for one poor soul. It is not what you do, but what God does with you, which leaves its mark upon eternity. What is the good of waste? And the worst of all waste, surely, is clerical waste. A spiritless minister is like a revolving engine which has lost its attachment to the machine, and which turn wheels to waste. It is better to stop such an engine, and save good fuel and machinery.

III

I am well aware that these considerations are only for those in danger, to prevent a break-down. And some one asks, "What have you got to say to those already smitten?" I will answer this query by dealing with some thoughts on HOW TO DEAL WITH NERVOUSNESS.

Time will be found to bring with it some correctives; only it has to be waited for, and the question is urgent. Still, it is some comfort to those who are naturally nervous to know that as years advance nerves will grow stronger if well treated. Many a nervous youth has found his nerves grow stronger as the years wore on.

Nerves will improve, too, if he gives them fair treatment. Regular habits will work wonders if persevered in. It will be all to the good if our nervous friend will shun late hours, banish all debilitating habits, take needful exercise, play upon another string than the clerical one, and so switch his mind off from the straining points of his life. Rest is not laziness, and leisure is not sinful. Make meat and drink your friend, and not your enemy. And let nothing "get on your nerves." Keep away from disturbing people, and cultivate the quiet and comfortable ones for your intimate friends. If thoughts begin to ferment and worry, shut them off; and above all don't let them keep you awake at night. Keep away from conflicts, idle controversies, and worrying topics. Don't dwell on anything disturbing. Morbid suspicions play havoc with nerves. Give up the notion that you are going to set the world right, and that without you it will tumble to pieces. We are none of us of such great importance as we think. Let all sense of dignity and proper pride and official greatness be dispatched promptly to their own limbo. Half our worries from people come from ruthlessly putting up their backs and by stroking them the wrong way. Let sleeping dogs lie, and if they should wake, don't step on their tails. Personally, I do not think we are any of us the worse for honest work, but we are infinitely the worse for worrying work, for mismanaged work, and for doing things busily which never need be done at all. To wear away the nerves on trifles, to consume energy on things which are neither duties nor necessities, to fret oneself to fiddle strings which never can be tuned, and only produce wails and howls, is nothing but midsummer madness. To cut off all occasions, and cut them up by the roots, is the primary duty of a nervous man.

But it is not enough to call in common sense and stop the leak. There are spiritual remedies worth tons of mere self-treatment, necessary though it is. Surely, spiritual men ought not to be reminded of these remedies. They certainly will not treat them lightly.

Is it not a plain fact that nervous worry mars work instead of mending it? When anxiety begins, faith ends. And where faith ends, we are ploughing sands, and carrying empty buckets to thirsty souls. Usefulness is killed by the spirit of worry. Worry is the fruitful mother of all that is bad; bad sermons, bad visits, bad efforts of all kinds. Worry turns good food into poison, and makes

us spill the precious treasures we are trying to carry to the needy. The most fruitful moods are the happy moods ; so most of us find. Long faces, mournful tones, pessimistic views of life, and jeremiads are simply pernicious in their effects. Cold water douches may be good in a doctor's hands, but in a parson's they do nothing but lower the spiritual temperature and dispose to perilous chills.

What is there to be afraid of ? we ask again. " Be not afraid of their faces," was the Divine exhortation to timid Jeremiah. " What can man do unto me ? " was the inquiry of another servant. " Great is truth and it shall prevail," and great is the true man and he shall prevail too. With a clear conscience a servant of God may stand four-square to an unfriendly world and be safe. And suppose words do rain and pelt upon us, they are only words, and weak at that. Hard words can only hurt as we stand exposed to them shelterless. Hidden in the Lord we are safe from all their venom. " Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy presence from the pride of man ; Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues." And if even hell be let loose upon us Christ can deal with devils, as He has before, and send them tripping. The shield of faith can turn all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And if we fear that we may fail in our ministry, let us remember that we are none of us responsible for results ; only for delivering our Gospel. God will see to results. God has never shifted that burden to human shoulders. We may keep an easy, undisturbed mind on that point, for God cannot fail.

The fact of the matter is that a nervous man is standing on wrong ground altogether, the ground of self-sufficiency. Of course he will tremble there. He ought to. But on the Divine rock of a promise, and with a Promiser Whose word is eternally true, trembling ought to be stifled. If it is not, so much the worse for the trembler. Resting in the Lord is infinitely better than resting in self, or in appearances, or in moods, or in idle hopes. Nobody yet has succeeded in keeping his footing on a quicksand. " Are bad nerves curable ? " is the anxious question of many, and the only answer worth giving is to ask another question. " Is anything impossible with God ? " Certainly, it must be along that line that the remedy is sought. Divine treatment is always best for inner disorders, and meets the needs of both body and soul. Prayer works wonders. Faith moves mountains, even mountains of

nervousness. The sense of His Presence gives to us the courage which filled Elijah's heart when he stood before the dread Ahab. He who could say and realize, "The Lord of Hosts liveth before Whom I stand," was not going to tremble before an earthly king, however tyrannous. In the calming, soothing presence throbbing nerve sank into rest, and fears were swallowed up by the larger faith. Fear God and you will fear nothing else but sin. We are but children, the oldest of us, and like children, frightened at shadows and the dark, but we only need a Father to take us in His arms, and like an earthly mother to soothe away our fears. We may still sob a little after we are pressed close to His breast, but it is only the after-swell when the storm has passed.

IV

There is one other topic to be touched upon before we close and that is THE GOOD SIDE OF NERVOUSNESS. That nerves have their uses is apt to be forgotten in the distress that their over-pressure causes. The debit side of nerves we have already considered ; now let us deal briefly with the credit side.

Nerves are a rare provocative of humility. They may be depended on to abate the proud and lofty spirit. Your nervous man is more prone to suffer the pangs of inferiority than to pretend to greatness and excellence. This is all to the good, unless he proceeds to deny the gifts he possesses, and takes a position lower than need be. But take it all round it keeps a nice balance between overweening conceit and grovelling prostration. Naturally too, nervousness takes a man off from excessive self-trust, which is the curse of men who minister. Your man of nerves, with lowered head and self-accusing spirit, finds it easier to trust his Lord than himself. And this too is to the good. Thank God when we can trust simply and fully, and thank God too for the cause which impels us to reach out our hands for the pierced Hands of Another. Probably, there is no man who feels more than does the nervous man the absolute necessity of leaning all his weight on his Lord. Thanks to his nerves too he is delivered from the temptation to pushfulness and aggressiveness. Your nervous man never wants to take a front seat and elbow other men out. All his nervous life he has to be pushed himself to take even a respectable place amongst his fellows. He is all for retirement into the background, and letting

others struggle for place. He has no wish to stand out in the world's great eye, and to cut a large figure. Surely, this too is all to the good, and better for the world's peace. Nervousness saves a man too from many temptations of life. Society has many perils, and life's gaieties may engulf a too sociable minister. They may call him unduly from his work, and may consume energies better employed. Now, your nervous man shrinks, perhaps unduly at times, from social life, and retires into his shell in love of peace and quiet. It certainly keeps him from foolish entanglements, and stops the world's chatter. But it does not do to yield too much to the hermit spirit, for there is a ministry in society as well as in the church. But if one must err, let it be rather on the side of safety.

One excellent nervous asset is the refinement which goes with such a physical construction. A coarse nature, which knows nothing of nerves, lacks the finer qualities of the best characters. Gentleness, tact, quick sympathies, and the ability to enter into others' difficulties seem to go with the nervous temperament. You will never find such a man making jokes on others' distresses, and especially on nervous distress. Such cruelty and brutality is the mark of the coarse to whom nerves are unintelligible. It is pleasant to think that there is something good about nerves, something even to boast of. For we are apt to fancy that it would be better to be without them altogether, so excruciating do they become at their very worst. But they have their place, even in the parson's constitution. They certainly cannot be done without. And, rightly handled, there is no reason why the most nervous should not reap the gains, and escape the ills of a too obtrusive nerve.

More Yarns on China, by Arthur E. Southon (C.M.S., 1s. net), is another of the capital little books for young folk and for general popular reading which have been produced by the United Council for Missionary Education, and are published by our different Missionary Societies. Among the titles of its chapters are "Green Peaches," "Poppies and Pills," "Bricklayers and Bandits," etc. This last title heads an account of Mr. F. J. Watt, the C.M.S. missionary recently so cruelly murdered.