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The Church in Industrial Areas

By J. W. CHARLEY

HABITS are resistant to change, and doubly so when they are religious. Be it in devotion or in evangelism, whatever has been sanctified by custom is not easily altered. Add to that the notoriously conservative frame of mind of the British people and the result is an amalgam that has gravely impeded the Church's witness in industrial areas. The gulf seems to grow wider, while the old methods prove largely ineffective. Here and there occur striking cases of individual conversion, but even then problems remain. As Canon Roger Lloyd put it, 'If the artisan comes over into the Church in his solitariness, all we have done for his natural community is to skim the cream off it and to leave the rest even thinner than it was before. And he himself will have stepped over the gulf dividing Us from Them.'¹ Sociologically the Church and the artisan are poles apart. Christian traditions raise unnecessary barriers, till we come perilously close to deserving our Lord's rebuke, 'For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God' (Matt. 15: 6, RSV). The pace of change has accelerated, and fresh situations demand fresh thinking. On the one hand, there is the need for a closer examination of the social position; on the other, we require a reappraisal of our theological bases. Without the one, we shall be irrelevant: without the other, we shall be misled.

THE SITUATION

Social patterns are very fluid. The factors involved are so numerous that it is a precarious task to attempt to relate them. Even the end of Feudalism and the rise of a new 'middle class', for all its profound implications, was not so far-reaching in its social effects as the disruption caused by the Industrial Revolution. It brought about the breakdown of a stratified society, where men knew their place in a small community. As country labourers flocked to the new sprawling industrial centres, they found an amorphous conglomeration of people. The intimacy was gone, and so was the cohesion with the squire at the apex. So many down-town areas today bear witness to the nebulous *sameness* of the rapidly-built new housing areas. Here too, because life had become so impersonal, there was a lack of *respected authorities*. The situation was not always like this. In some of the smaller industrial towns, especially in the North-West, the influx of labourers formed new suburban communities that could bear some comparison with their former agricultural environment. But by and large the change was immeasurable and the churches failed to adapt themselves to a radically different situation. Anglicans and Dissenters alike admitted their general failure in the nineteenth century to reach the working classes:

Roman Catholics lamented their inability to *retain* their members among the labouring population, which engulfed the influx of Irish labourers after the potato famine. The most striking exceptions to the general trend were the Primitive Methodists⁵ and the Salvation Army.⁶ They better understood the people they were approaching, since many of their preachers and workers were drawn from a similar background. For this reason alone they deserve closer study than they are normally given.⁴

Certain misconceptions need to be cleared away if we are to come to an accurate assessment of the social outlook of the industrial areas.

(i) *It was not poverty* that created the new situation. The evidence of wage and price movements indicate that there was a rise in real incomes between the time of the Gordon Riots in 1780 and the Chartist affair in 1848.⁵ Nevertheless there was also the accompanying problem of the alternation between boom and slump. At times the poverty was appalling, but it would be misleading to regard it as the characteristic mark of the early industrial towns. Agricultural workers received considerably less pay. Today industry offers a good wage. What persists is the element of insecurity: a slump in trade, government action or increasing automation may cause redundancy.⁶ And you never know when.

(ii) *It was not illiteracy* that created the new situation. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of an articulate leadership among the proletariat. As much as anything this stemmed initially from the provision of Sunday Schools by voluntary Christian bodies. Paradoxically it did not result in close affiliation with the Churches. Perhaps our generation can better understand the reason as we watch the reactions of the emergent African nations whose leadership was nurtured in Mission schools. Today the industrial worker has an open door for education for his family, but there lingers a sense of the impracticality of further training. To earn is to live.

The problem of understanding the nature of an industrial community lies much deeper than the level of economics' and education,⁶ though both are integrally related. Perhaps the greatest omission in the last century was a study of the effects of mass moves of population. One wonders how far our present-day planning is not equally neglectful, when large numbers of people are uprooted and set down in huge, impersonal blocks of flats, without any natural social link with one another. Ignorance is a major hindrance. As G. D. H. Cole has pointed out, the class composition of society has become much more complex over the past hundred years. "The skilled and unskilled manual workers are much nearer than they were to forming a single class . . . the cause has lain rather in an upward assimilation of educational and social standards than in any decline in their economic position. The result is a working-class movement greatly extended at both ends, but the groups which make up this movement are certainly not united by a community of "misery" or reduced to a common level of "proletarianism"."⁷

It used to be said of the Puritans that they were masters of two books, the Bible and the human heart. Twentieth-century Christians need to be master of a third—sociology. By that term I do not mean

all the technicalities of the specialist. The Christian who is concerned to witness to Christ in industrial areas wants simple tools to use. The kind of insight provided by Richard Hoggart is much nearer the mark.¹⁰ It is far more practically illuminating than the social divisions employed in the Censuses of 1951 and 1961. The Christian's quest has a special object in view.

Take two examples of men confronting this complex situation in the nineteenth century. In 1842 Edwin Chadwick produced his 'Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population.' Chadwick was a Benthamite Utilitarian, yet he worked in close co-operation with the Evangelical, Lord Ashley. He complains of misdirected charity: 'Charity, which when promoted by pure motives, always blesses him that gives, does not always bless him that takes'. The remedy must be government action. 'The most experienced public officers . . . agree in giving the first place . . . to the removal of what may be termed the *physical barriers* to improvement, and that as against such barriers *moral agencies* have but a remote chance of success' (italics mine).

Secondly, in 1890 William Booth published *In Darkest England, and the Way out*. Here was an elaborate plan for the 'submerged tenth' of the population. It was provoked by the distressing discovery of the frequency with which his converts in the industrial areas relapsed from their profession of faith. Thus social welfare became necessary for effective evangelism. The provision of work began to replace mere relief for the indigent. This was the vision of Commissioner Frank Smith, who saw that poverty was an evil *in itself* to be dealt with, whether or not it opened the door for evangelism.¹¹ Booth encouraged him.

Here, then, were two outstanding leaders, beginning from different premises but arriving at the same conclusion. 'Moral agencies' were obstructed by 'physical barriers'. Time-honoured methods were no longer satisfactory. If, from the Christian point of view, a lasting, indigenous work was to be achieved, the social problems had to be tackled. Today the Welfare State has removed many of those physical disabilities, but there still persists the moral and spiritual alienation of the artisan from the Churches. Anyone who has lived in an industrial sector of one of our big cities knows that the working-class, the artisan, whatever he may be called, remains part of a distinctive group. The real 'physical barriers' to the Christian outreach are manifestly not poverty or illiteracy. We are faced by a much more complex sociological phenomenon.

THE CHRISTIAN'S DUTY

The scope of mission is thus described in the Statement of the Keele Congress, 1967, Section 20: 'God's purpose is to make men new through the gospel, and through their transformed lives to bring all aspects of human life under the Lordship of Christ. Christians share in God's work of mission by being present among non-Christians to live and to speak for Christ, and in His name to promote justice and meet human need in all its forms. Evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God.'

In the last sentence lies the crux of the problem. How precisely

should we relate evangelism and compassionate service? The emphasis on *Missio Dei* rather than *Missio Ecclesiae* in the World Council of Churches has tended sometimes to break down the distinction between the Church and the world. In this case compassionate service becomes the centre of interest and evangelism is relegated to the back seat. Evangelicals have sometimes tended to reverse the process: evangelism is the prime concern, yet conscience bids us find a corner for social work. But in fact the two must go together. Compassionate service is an integral part of mission, not a mere gimmick nor just sugar on the gospel pill.

The difficulty begins to resolve itself when we recognise that the Christian's duty is *Love*. There is nothing more basic than this. It was in this manner that Jesus summarised the law (Matt. 22: 35-40). The Apostle Paul, speaking of man's relation to his fellows, says the same: 'Love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom. 13: 8-10). Now love means *caring*. To love God means to care about His Name, His honour, His laws. It is not a mere emotion but involves practical obedience. 'If you really love Me, you will keep the commandments I have given you' (John 14: 15, Phillips). Similarly, to love my neighbour means to care for his welfare, his good. It involves caring for the entire person and not just one facet of his life. The two sides are brought together in 1 John 5: 1, 2: 'Every one who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.' The Evangelical stress on the mission of the Church can easily cause compassionate care to become a mere appendage. Is there not a feeling that to look after the gravely mentally retarded, those who have no hope of improvement, or to care for the progressively senile is almost wasted time, because it offers no platform for direct evangelism? Why have Evangelicals a much better record in youth work than in ministry to the elderly? Now there are many notable exceptions in Evangelical history, but confusion over motives does cause distortions. We need to be reminded again that mission springs out of love. Our first duty is to love, not to preach. But because we love God, we long supremely to see men honour Him in worship and humble service; because we love people, our greatest desire for them must be that they come to a saving knowledge of Christ, which is their deepest need. A Moslem said of Temple Gairdner, 'I felt he loved me for myself, not because I might become a Christian only, and in this I found he was like Christ'.¹² This is real love, without strings attached. Contrast the reaction to American Aid in some of the under-developed countries, because it involves what is felt to be both insincerity and exploitation.¹³

In the light of the history of Christian withdrawal from down-town areas, how vital it is to recapture this attitude of love. Love cannot be explained. It is not a means to an end. God's election of Israel in the last analysis could only be ascribed to the fact that 'the Lord loved you' (Deut. 7: 7, 8). Love holds together evangelism and compassionate service. It prevents a false dichotomy of the sacred and the secular. It is easy to forget how great a proportion of the gospels is devoted to the philanthropic ministry of Jesus. Even the gift of a cup of cold water will not lack its reward (Matt. 10: 42).

Total love cares for the total man. The Hebrew idea of the soul, *nephesh*, involves the whole personality, physical as well as spiritual. To love my neighbour is, then, a very comprehensive thing. Full employment, equitable working conditions, just laws, proper education, good sanitation—these are matters with which Christian love must be concerned, because they affect men's welfare. Merely to preach is inadequate, as Booth found in his generation and as we are discovering today. But to swing the pendulum so far the other way that the Church becomes simply another social-service centre is a disastrous mistake. Yet it is happening in many places today. There is a fundamental error that has promoted this trend, which prevails in a certain theological climate. Theology has been equated with anthropology, so that God and Man to all intents and purposes are virtually identified. As Hendrik Kraemer pertinently asks, 'If God is called "ground of Being", does there remain a real possibility of clear distinction between Being and its ground, which is more than verbal declaration, and which really allows a relation?'¹⁴ Harvey Cox reaches the astonishing conclusion at the end of his survey of 'The Secular City' (1965) with these words: 'God wants man to be interested not in Him but in his fellow man', p. 265.

Clearly, with love as the mainspring, evangelism and compassionate service combine. There is no blue-print. Love will determine its activity according to the need it encounters: this is the point of the story of the good Samaritan. It is impossible to define how much time Christians should devote to one or the other: love must decide. Of course God has established His Church for a particular purpose, in which the ministry fulfils a special function. There is a distinction between the function of the Church as a body and that of the individual, as there is between the minister and the layman, but you cannot demarcate a rigid dividing-line. At certain times the minister may need to be in the van of the promotion of social welfare. As George MacLeod asks, 'When in practice thieves enter a church to despoil the offertory box does the minister stand in his pulpit and cry "send for the laity"?'¹⁵ Since love must concern itself with the total man, it may require anything and everything of us for its fulfilment. In the industrial areas that means overcoming the physical and sociological barriers as well as direct evangelism.

MEETING POINTS

So far we have considered that there does exist a social grouping which we may call working-class, industrial or artisan. The complexity of its development makes it difficult to define. What we do know is that the Church has become increasingly out of touch with it, in large part because of a failure in understanding. Now it presents a needy mission field to be penetrated with the motivation of love, which will tackle each need as it is met. 'Meeting-points' suggest physical contact. Crucial and valuable as modern media of communication are, they can never be a substitute for personal relations. In the Acts of the Apostles we see Christians going to the places where people congregate: Paul visits the synagogues, or he meets people in their homes, or he attends the Athenian 'Speakers' Corner' on the Areopagus.

Instinctively these men discovered the natural groupings. For varied reasons Paul would sometimes revert to his trade as a leather-worker, which no doubt gave him fruitful contacts. Modern industry in contrast is thoroughly impersonal, allowing of very little intercourse, except during lunch-breaks. An industrial chaplain must often appear as a rather tiresome intruder, who is severely handicapped by the basic pattern of industry. Yet ingenuity can find ways of making personal contact. The steady round of home-visiting has not lost its importance, as the London City Mission can amply demonstrate. Jesus was described as 'the friend of publicans and sinners'. What His critics said in mockery, Christians gladly welcome. Even so, this only scratches the surface of the problem.

There are two fundamental 'meeting-points' which invite careful examination. Where do we start?

(i) *In Need*. There is a distinction here between *felt* need and *real* need. This is well illustrated in the story of Bartimaeus. Jesus asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mark 10: 51). His felt need was obviously the restoration of his sight. And what of his real need? 'Your faith has *saved* you . . . he followed Jesus in *the way*.' Surely the double meaning of these italicised words suggest that Bartimaeus received much more than just his physical sight.

It is people's need that we must discover. In the case of children, youth and the elderly this is comparatively straightforward, though certain cases will always be perplexing. Nevertheless it would be foolish to think that this is quickly grasped in areas where the Church has long been out of touch. It will necessitate 'costly, long-term policies of involvement', not expecting immediate results.¹⁶ But the biggest problem is the great block of people between the ages of 25 and 50. The failure of gospel preaching to such people in the industrial areas is that usually it does not correspond to any *felt* need and therefore appears irrelevant. The happy pagan, the uncommitted and complacent agnostic, cannot see why the Christian faith should affect him. It is precisely here that love will discover where the needs do exist and are felt. There are many gaps in the Welfare services. Modern administrative society lacks the personal touch. Local government and Trade Unions face big difficulties, and most people do not bother. This is what has left the door wide open to the Communists to infiltrate and dominate many Trade Unions, where their power far exceeds their numerical strength. They, at least, are not apathetic. Nor can Christians afford to be. Love cares and therefore gets involved. And it is not wasted time.

One prevalent working-class characteristic is sociability. The large crowd at a football match or on Brighton beach is an attraction. The pub and the Bingo Hall are current focal points of the community's life. But our Church fellowships are of an alien social pattern—neat rows of chairs, a carefully delivered monologue, all set usually in a fairly bleak environment. What they appreciate is an air of informality and a fair measure of participation. It was the realisation of this that in part accounts for the success of the Salvation Army in Sheffield in the nineteenth century. They met on neutral ground in a public hall; men could come in their working-clothes; the meetings were

usually run by men of their own kind; there was real participation in the singing, because the tunes were musical in the ears of the particular audience.

This is where better sociological knowledge of a practical sort is so needful. But following the pattern of Jesus' dealings with the woman of Samaria, we may move on from felt needs to real needs, from sociology to theology.

(ii) *In Mind*. How far can the Christian message be expected to correspond to the thinking of man? For all their blindness, are men totally unaware of their real spiritual need until they are encountered by Christ Himself through the gospel? There is a whole field of doctrine here that needs a lot of re-thinking, by Evangelicals in particular, namely common grace and general revelation. The Word of God is described as 'the true Light, which lighteth every man' (John 1: 9). It is a difficult passage, which could be understood in more than one way. Calvin, in his commentary on the fourth gospel, says: 'Beams from this light are shed upon the whole race of men'. More explicit is the teaching of Romans that men have both an awareness of *God*, though they try to suppress it (1: 18-23), and some knowledge of His moral *law* (2: 14-6). It is because man is created in the image of God that this vestige remains, though now much obscured. That is why he is said to be 'without excuse'. We cannot plead ignorance. Pagan philosophers and moralists have contributed positively to man's understanding. Concerning the light of truth that they exhibit, Calvin wrote: 'The nature of man, fallen though he be from his integrity and much corrupted, does not cease still to be adorned with many of the gifts of God. If we recognise the Spirit of God as the unique fountain of truth, we shall never despise the truth wherever it may appear, unless we wish to do dishonour to the Spirit of God.'¹⁷ Once this is appreciated, it affects our attitude to the non-Christian. We are then ready to learn as well as to teach.

However, this doctrine needs very careful handling. The use made of it historically is instructive and admonitory. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Lamennais criticised the apologetic of the Roman Church, because in a changed world it continued to base everything on the Church's authority. All truth was channelled through the Roman *magisterium*, whereas increasingly scepticism would not listen. In his *Essai sur l'indifférence* he argued that men are certain of the things about which everyone agrees. 'Madness consists in preferring one's own reason, one's individual authority, to the general authority or to common consent' (*Essai*, II 94). This philosophy of *sensus communis* was condemned in a Papal Encyclical of 1834.¹⁸ A little later F. D. Maurice approached the subject by means of an examination of the Quaker doctrine of the 'Inner Light', which he defended against its opponents.¹⁹ It certainly contributed to his 'become what you are' type of theology. 'Is there no difference between the believer and the unbeliever? Yes, the greatest difference. But the difference is not about the *fact*, but precisely in the *belief* of the fact.'²⁰ The shades of this theology are still very much with us. Finally, we can consider the rejection by Karl Barth of the whole concept of General Revelation because of a fear that it detracted from

the glory of Christ as the sole source of revelation. In fact he has subsequently modified his position.²¹ Yet his original attitude may well reflect something of Evangelical fears.

Manifestly it is a complicated doctrine, but it impinges upon this problem of meeting the minds of people. This is the sphere of pre-evangelism. It is interesting to find atheistic writers like Sartre and Camus having to resort to theological terms to express what they are groping after. So our theology may not always be quite so incomprehensible as we imagine. Paul employed the writings of the poets on the Areopagus and Gnostic terminology in writing to the Colossians as a vehicle for expressing the full Christian truth. There is no doubt at all that in our present era Christian moral qualities are still largely endorsed even in the industrial areas, be it the result of general revelation or a post-Christian hangover. The *Daily Mirror* recently had articles and captions which bore this out, by holding up certain qualities for admiration and emulation.

- (a) *Truth*—in the context of the Chalfont affair.
- (b) *Courage*—heading, 'Two priests brave a gun in class-room'.
- (c) *Justice*—title of an Old Codgers' letter, 'No Justice'.
- (d) *Compassion*—front page photograph of a German nurse in action at the scene of a train disaster.

Again and again qualities like this are commended in the popular press, the very papers that have the largest readership in industrial areas. But these qualities are seen to be more often the exception than the rule. When they occur, they elicit an appreciative response. That is to say, there are certain moral qualities that strongly appeal to unregenerate man, even if sometimes he opposes them.

How can the Church break into the network of an industrial community? The complacent agnosticism of the happy pagan must be outshone. What he regards as exceptional must be seen to be the normal pattern of life of the Christian. This is what proves the reality of Christian profession, but it is the hard and slow way. Only so will the relevancy of the gospel be realised and a platform for its effective proclamation found. Just as the Thessalonians became followers of Paul's clientele as a stepping-stone to becoming followers of the Lord (1 Thess. 1: 6), so Christian pressure and example are essential preliminaries to evangelism amongst artisans. In their social context especially personal relationships count for far more than talk, but their establishment is not completed in a day. Love is the most powerful weapon in the Christian armoury. As Pastor Wurmbrand maintains, after his appalling sufferings in Rumania, 'Only love can change the communists'.²² And it is not only communists. 'For people in cities as elsewhere, the basic need for full human living is love: belonging to a loving community in which acceptance, forgiveness, and purpose may be found in common with others.'²³ The love of God has a peculiar magnetism when it is demonstrated in the fellowship and service of Christ's disciples.

Christians are called to bear witness to Christ's Lordship over every department of life. It must be lived out as well as spoken. Such

involvement is not a case of being side-tracked from the gospel. There are many sincere Christians using the old methods whom God is certainly using to the blessing of others. But how often do we find the growth of a truly indigenous church in an industrial area as the result? Rather, it is a case of 'brands plucked from the burning' without any noticeable difference ensuing in that community. Real *agape* concerns the whole of life. It is costly in thought (how should the changing state of affairs be tackled?), in study of the theological and practical implications, and in time (this is not the place for counting heads). To unravel the skein of pressing demands upon us is essential if our priorities are not to be blurred. But the key to it all—'Love is patient, love never ends'.

¹ Roger Lloyd, *The Church and the Artisan Today* (1952), p. 79.

² R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England 1800-1850* (1937), especially the Introduction.

³ K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (1963), chapter 5.

⁴ For example, E. R. Wickham in *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957), pp. 156-8 alludes briefly and rather grudgingly to the success in Sheffield of the Salvation Army and the Workmen's Mission to Workmen and concludes, 'How dated these evangelistic efforts amongst the poor strike us today, and how harsh the modern theological judgment upon them'.

⁵ E. N. Williams, *A Documentary History of England*, Vol. 2, 1559-1931, (1965), pp. 207-8.

⁶ T. W. Freeman, *The Conurbations of Great Britain* (1959), pp. 350-1 cites cases of the movement of working populations because of the uncertainty of trade. 'It is one of the most ironic features of twentieth century economic history that it has become necessary to attract industry to some of the very areas on which Britain's nineteenth century prosperity was based.'

⁷ Neil J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959), pp. 384-408 seeks to account for working-class history in terms of a regular sequence of change in the structure of social life and demolishes the economic explanation.

⁸ The extent to which education determines social class is examined by David C. Marsh, *The Changing Social Structure of England and Wales, 1871-1961* (1965), chapter 7. The result is most inconclusive.

⁹ G. D. H. Cole, *Studies in Class Structure* (1955), p. 59.

¹⁰ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957).

¹¹ K. S. Inglis, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-2.

¹² C. E. Padwick, *Temple Gairdner of Cairo* (1929), p. 142.

¹³ This is very vividly portrayed in William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (1959), chapter 13. The whole book could almost be a parable of the Church's failure in the industrial areas, as the Rev. David Sheppard once pointed out to me.

¹⁴ *Religion and the Christian Faith*, p. 435.

¹⁵ *Only One Way Left* (1961 edition), p. 136.

¹⁶ Trevor O'Neill, *Message Delivered* (1967), p. 12. The author describes his experiences with 'unchurched' youth on a housing estate.

¹⁷ *Institutes*, II. 2. 15. Calvin's approach to this issue is lucidly explained in François Wendel, *Calvin*, Fontana edition (1965), pp. 161-5, 192-4.

¹⁸ See A. R. Vidler, *Prophecy and Papacy* (1954), chapter 3.

¹⁹ *The Kingdom of Christ*, I (1958 edition), pp. 41-57.

²⁰ F. Maurice, *Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (1884) I, p. 155. See also A. R. Vidler, *F. D. Maurice and Company* (1966), chapter 2.

²¹ See Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (1967), chapter 3, on Barth's debate with Brunner.

²² Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (1967), p. 55.

²³ Tony Bridge, *Urban Life and Ministry* (1967), p. 19.