

EVANGELISM, THE PRIMARY TASK OF THE CHURCH.

BY THE RIGHT REV. A. W. T. PEROWNE, D.D., BISHOP OF WORCESTER.

IN a recent issue of the *C.E.N.* a weekly contributor of a religious causerie in a South of England daily paper is quoted as asking the pertinent question, "What is the Church's job?" To this he gives the following answer, which is worth repeating in full as bearing on the title of this opening paper :

"We know why theatres exist, and cinemas, and law courts, and hospitals. *Why does the Church exist?* Much good work that used to be done by the Church is now done, and done better, by this or that charitable institution, and would still be done if all the Churches were closed. What then is the unique work which the Church does, and which no other institution does, or could do? The answer is that the Church exists to worship God, and that if the Churches were closed, the corporate worship of God in the midst of society would cease."

The Editor, commenting on this, rightly says that it would be difficult to imagine a more inadequate, misleading and even mischievous reply to a simple question.

Yet I wonder whether the average Churchwarden, especially those in country parishes, of the type that hates to see "money go out of the parish," would not consider that to be on the whole rather a beautiful and satisfying answer to the question. It is at least a high ideal that we come to Church not to have our senses satisfied by beautiful ritual and music and fine preaching, but to pay worship to Him, who has been revealed as altogether lovely, and "worthy to receive the power and riches and wisdom and might, and honour, and glory, and blessing." It is certainly true, that, if we are to believe the picture given us in the Book of Revelation of the new heaven and the new earth, the chief occupation of the redeemed who shall walk therein will be worship of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, who are as well the temple thereof. And this view of the primary task of the Church is shared by not a few of the Clergy. For what is the test only too often of good health and progress in parochial life, sometimes consciously acknowledged, but perhaps more often unconsciously aimed at? I do not refer to the obviously lower standards such as the amount of money raised and spent on Church expenses and adornment, or the perfection of multitudinous organisations which are the hallmark of a successful parish nowadays, but the far more subtle, yet erroneous, arithmetical standards of worship by which so often men measure their success or failure as parish priests. You know the type of man who will boast of the great increase of his Easter communicants, or of the communions made in his Church during the past year. I have little doubt that many of us here have yielded to that subtle temptation of "counting heads," aiming at

quantity in communicants or in Confirmation candidates, forgetful that in the old Book numbers count for so very little in the sight of God, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think through a single individual completely consecrated to His service. To make communicants is not enough. That is to mistake the means for the end. Our primary work as Ministers of the Gospel is to make men and women attractive witnesses of Jesus Christ, though it is not we, but the power of the Holy Ghost working through us, that alone can accomplish this purpose. Evangelism, not worship, is the primary task of the Church, though worship is an essential ingredient for effective evangelism. It is worth while, in view of the urgent call that has come to the Church from so many quarters lately with regard to this matter, to inquire in more detail into the truth of this statement that Evangelism is the primary task of the Church.

You may remember that Harnack, in his *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, maintains that Jesus "cannot have given any command upon the mission to the whole world." He admits that Jesus disentangled religion from its national Jewish setting: that men, not Jews, were to be its adherents: that as the Jewish people spurned His message, a judgment was coming on the "children of the Kingdom," and He prophesied that a crowd would come pouring in from the highways and hedges: and finally, that though the nation were rejected and the temple overthrown, this would not involve the destruction of Christ's work, but rather that in them, as in His own passion, could be seen the condition of His work's completion. Such, says Harnack, is the universalism of the preaching of Jesus. That the Gospels contain such commands to spread the Evangel through the world he admits, but he declares that it is easy to show that such commands are neither genuine, nor a part of the original tradition. He wipes out of the Gospel texts, and the first Chapter of the Acts, the familiar injunctions of our Lord to evangelise. "In this connection," he adds, "the fourth Gospel need not be considered at all"—Paul too "knew nothing of such a command." "The conclusion therefore must be that Jesus never issued such a command at all, but that this version of His life was due to the historic developments of a later age, the words being *appropriately* put into the mouth of the risen Lord." It would almost seem as if Harnack had allowed himself to be persuaded into discounting our Lord's injunction in order to argue all the more pointedly for the *implicit* universalism of the Evangel as taught by Jesus.

"At the time when our Gospels were *written*, a Lord and Saviour who had confined His preaching to the Jewish people without even issuing a single command to prosecute the universal mission, was an utter impossibility. . . . One might even argue that the universal mission was an inevitable issue of the religion and spirit of Jesus, and that its origin, not only apart from any direct word of Jesus, but in verbal contradiction to several of His sayings, is really a stronger testimony to the method, the strength and the spirit of His preaching than if it were the outcome of a deliberate command."

For us who cannot follow Harnack in his contention that all these last commands of our Lord to His disciples were later insertions, there remains the twofold argument in favour of Evangelism being the primary task of the Church. We believe that notwithstanding our Lord's words to the Syrophœnician woman, notwithstanding His limitation of the Mission of the Twelve "Go not into any way of the Gentiles, and enter not into any city of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. x. 5), and other similar passages, it was His expressed command to His followers that they should go forth and preach the Gospel and bear witness to Him: and secondly, as Harnack admits, the very nature of the Gospel itself would require that those who experienced its blessings and power would be compelled to make it known to others. For us Evangelism is both explicit as a command laid upon us by our Master, and implicit in the very nature of the Gospel itself. If we are true disciples of Him who claimed to be the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, how is it possible that we can do other than share this wonderful news with others? If all this is true for us, it must be true for all mankind, and possession of this Gospel lays an obligation upon us to tell it forth by word and life. Christianity is not primarily a system, is not a set of rules to live by, is not a Law, but a spirit. It cannot be taught as it were *in vacuo*, but must be caught. Hence we see how it had to be the work of Jesus to train His apostles to a personal trust and knowledge of Himself—who was the Gospel—until at Cæsarea Philippi at last He found the rock on which alone He could build His Church, in Peter's confession "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Now He could leave them, confident that they could never again mistake the inner core of His teaching, Himself, the incarnate Son of God, who though crucified would rise again and be with His Church throughout the ages as an ever-present Lord and Saviour. Now at last He was secure, for these His close companions could never be silent about Him once they saw Him risen; "We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard" and when they had lost their Master's bodily presence, His Spirit was available in all its old power and more, after Pentecost. There was within them a compulsion to share that marvellous secret for which the world had been waiting since the dawn of time, and they could not keep silent: "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel." Herein they believed they had the answer not merely to their own personal problems, to that longing for freedom of sonship which St. Paul had felt so acutely, and found impossible of attainment under the law, and to that passionate hunger and thirst after righteousness which Judaism could never satisfy, but also to their social, moral and political problems, as we see illustrated by the "Therefore" sections of St. Paul's Epistles. That Spirit of Jesus could be attained only by identification with the crucified and risen Lord, of which the seal of baptism was the pledge, and the Holy Com-

munion the constant renewal. And anyone thus one with Christ, "in Christ" to use the Apostle's favourite expression, could not help speaking of his experience and witnessing to it by his way of life. So men and women caught fire from one another, and the Acts is the account St. Luke gives us of the way in which the fire spread—to Ethiopia through the eunuch enlightened by Philip, to the Gentile Cornelius through that prejudiced Peter, acting under the impulse of his vision, through Paul and Barnabas first acting together, and then leading separate missionary parties, until Rome was reached and the Gospel preached there at the centre of the world. What a dangerous haste was here! the Apostles ordaining them elders in every city—baptising a whole household after a night's preaching in the jailer's house at Philippi: moving on from one place to another before, as we should say, there was time for proper Church order to be made, and consolidation secured: always passing on the glad news. Truly in those early days Evangelism was recognised indeed as the primary task of the Church.

What is happening to-day? Someone has said that after Constantine's conversion the World got into the Church, and has never got out again. It is difficult to recapture the enthusiasm of those early days, when to be a Christian often meant persecution and death. To-day too many of us are inoculated with a mild form of Christianity, and the real thing is the more difficult to catch. But it is not impossible. And it is most supremely and urgently necessary, if the world is to be saved from collapse.

It needs not that I should paint a lurid picture of half-empty Churches at home, of the growing laxity of morals, of the semi-paganism revealed in cinemas and the cheaper press, in neglect of Sunday worship and the lessened financial support of the Church.

"There are even more serious perils confronting Christendom abroad: in the triumph of anti-religious forces amongst the peoples of the Soviet republics; in the threatened apostasy of Germany, once in the van of Christian thought and life. Turn your eyes overseas if you would realise the full significance of what is happening in Europe, for there you will see these same anti-Christian influences gathering force in the Near East and throughout Asia: you will see the growing tension between white and black in South Africa, the disintegration of tribal sanctions in Tropical Africa, the growth of secularism in India, the very home of religion."

The Missionary Council, from whose appeal to the Church I am quoting, reminds us too that the Missionary Societies have had more and more deeply driven home to them the fact that those convictions and enthusiasms which made possible in England the immense missionary expansion of the nineteenth century have seriously weakened, and that only a spiritual revival at home can set free those increased resources in men and money which are so urgently needed overseas to-day.

And yet the outlook is not all dark by any means.

"As we look overseas at the young Churches to-day, the prevailing impression is not one of failure and defeat: it is one of faith and courage and advance. In India and in Tropical Africa hundreds of thousands are

pressing into the Christian Church and witnessing by their lives to the power of Christ. In South Africa, Korea, and the South Seas native Churches are being formed. Individual lives are redeemed and remade: men and women, as to-day in Persia and India, are prepared to face persecution and out-casting that they may bear witness to the redeeming love of the Cross and the power of the living Christ. Everywhere, notwithstanding failures and disappointments, we can see manifest tokens of that same Spirit of Power that was shed forth upon the Church at Pentecost."

Our problem is twofold—we have to bring home to the Church this fundamental truth that Evangelism is its primary task. That is largely a matter of teaching—patient, persistent, winsome teaching. But by far the more difficult part is "so to present Jesus Christ (in our own persons and in our own lives) in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of the Church." That is to evangelise, that is the full task set before us. Who indeed is sufficient for these things?

"Our own sympathy with others and anxiety for their welfare are so feeble, so fitful, so liable to err, that they must be caught up into the stream of God's desire before He can use them. As God floods us with the waters of His Grace; as we begin to see as He sees, to think as He thinks, to yearn as He yearns, and to live as He lives; and as He enables us to see Him as He is, and reveals to us what He is doing, He can use us in ways we never dreamed of as possible to us. And then we cannot help telling others of His generosity of power: the News is too good to be kept to ourselves; we cannot do any other than share it and proclaim it." (Editorial note in *East and West Review*, April, 1935.)

God grant that at this Conference we may consecrate ourselves anew to this primary task of Evangelism, and begin by rooting out from our own lives all that may be hindering the Holy Spirit from using us as instruments in winning others for our Master.

"THIS ABOVE ALL. . . ." By Mary Gamble. *Allenson*. 2s. net.

This is "a Plea for Honesty at all costs" by a young person very much in earnest and very critical of nearly everything that is. We understand and sympathise with much that she advances. She seems, however, to live in a world peopled by prudes, snobs, ogres and hypocrites—people with no common sense and wholly lacking in humour. Further experience will doubtless correct some of her views. There is a Foreword by the Bishop of Malmesbury.

H. D.

THE TOWER AND THE CROSS. By Thomas Tiplady. *R.T.S.* 1s. net.

These sixteen Bible readings—for such perhaps they may be called—are readable and uplifting. They show from Bible stories how fatal is the path of human choosing and how necessary it is that God's way should be followed. The book is full of suggestive thoughts and adorned by many apt poetical extracts. It is a remarkably cheap shillingsworth.

H. D.