

## ART. VI.—CHRISTIAN WORK.

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SYSTEM.

THERE is no more difficult subject to deal with than that of Christian Work, and how it is to be done. Simple though it seems to do some work for God, and to take up that which appears most suitable to our powers and position, it is by no means so simple in reality. The fact is, that our great enemy uses his power of opposition most particularly whenever any useful work is being done, and endeavours to divert it from its aim by causing every kind of difficulty and hindrance.

There appear to be two dangers, or rather groups of dangers, equally real, and in some senses equally great, which meet us in considering this subject—the one the dangers of too much individuality, and the other the dangers of too much system. The former class lead to isolation, narrowness, and selfishness; the latter have a tendency towards mechanism and unreality—towards the loss of the *spirit* in the *arrangement*.

To go more into detail. The first class of dangers attack both the Worker and the work. And to begin with the Worker. We will suppose some gentleman or lady, conscious of the need of workers in the vineyard, and conscious of a certain power for work, beginning some undertaking entirely by themselves. They are anxious to be quite independent, to have no interference, to have full scope for the powers which they feel they possess, to be able unfettered to follow out their own theories, and to make their own experiments. The first result may be outwardly satisfactory: they may realize the sense of popularity, they may have the satisfaction of succeeding where others have failed, they may attach to themselves a class, or a body of workers, or a district, or a mission; but meanwhile are they not losing the blessing of associated work, and running a great risk of magnifying themselves, and forgetting that they are only the earthen vessels in which the treasure is given for a time, and which at the Master's pleasure are broken or laid aside? Again, there is the danger of thinking the particular work in which they are engaged is the only work. Everything is looked at in its bearing on that work; the undertakings of others are ignored, or it may be even opposed; the advantage of conference is lost; and instead of the thought of our unprofitableness being the prominent one in our minds, it gives place to an idea of our own value, and even to a kind of notion that our Master cannot do without us. Then too we are in danger of using up our own material, for we are living on ourselves; and the more isolated and selfish we become in our work, the less near we draw our Father in heaven and to the one source of all strength.

Nor does the work escape ; for, being the creation of one mind guided by no general principles, fenced by no boundaries, governed by no discipline, it is apt to be eclectic and not comprehensive, partial and not complete. Many forget the responsibility of *omission* in any work that they undertake, and are apt to console themselves with what they do, and shut their eyes to what they do not do. And then there is the great danger of interference; for, working apart, it is not easy always to keep clear of ground occupied by another, and so it very often happens that one corner of the field is, as it were, worked twice over, and another is untouched.

And then, if work has been jealously kept in one hand—has been always “my work” and entirely isolated from all others—what is to happen when the Workman begins to fail, and the health gives way or the summons comes to go home. The mantle is not easily left to another, and those who have been attached to one individual, and been taught, perhaps unintentionally, to look upon themselves as apart from other work, not unfrequently break up altogether, and scatter to the four winds, leaving the work of years, as far as the eye can see, without result, and almost as if it had never been.

Or it may be that the prosperity of an individual work excites the jealousy of others who have their own pet schemes, and who are endeavouring to gain all that they can for them ; and then follow—it is no unreal contingency—accusations and counter-accusations, revelations and counter-revelations : much made of little mistakes. And the work of God stands still while the Labourers are carrying on their unseemly contention.

But the other side, as we have said, is not without equal dangers. The earnest Worker gives himself up to the arrangements of a system ; accepts rules and restrictions, not always wisely laid down ; sees an opening here and a path of usefulness there ; and is unable, from the machinery with which he or she is surrounded, to take advantage of the one or the other. Thus such a one becomes fretted and harassed, and instead of working freely, and bringing out the powers that they have, the freshness is taken from the work ; it becomes a burden, and eventually is laid down with a feeling that the life is gone from it, and that it has ceased to be worth doing, being reduced to a mere piece of machinery. Sometimes indeed it happens that in a work of this kind the Worker is led by the system in which he is involved to do things of which he personally does not approve, and thus his very conscience is wounded in the work which he loves. Cases are not unfrequent in which a work that succeeded admirably as long as it was in one hand, began to fail utterly when laden with the cumbrous paraphernalia of Clergy and Committees and published rules, &c. &c. ;

while, on the other hand, many a "private venture" has failed because it has been too exclusively the work of one individual to obtain the confidence of the public.

These opposite difficulties have beset most of those who are really in earnest either about working themselves for the Lord, or about setting others to work in His service. But the question is, How are they to be met?

The first thing that seems to force itself on the mind of any one who undertakes to work for God is the absolute necessity of entirely consecrating the work to Him—not merely intending to do so, but actually doing it. Till this be done, and by God's grace the whole thing be offered to Him as a "living sacrifice," the path is beset with dangers; for "my work" and "my workers" are constantly coming to the front, and even unconsciously the Workman steps somewhat into the place of the Master. Let it then be the fundamental rule of all Christian Work, "they first gave their own selves to the Lord."

This once done, the rest becomes much easier, for a double foundation is laid: on the part of the individual worker that of self-abnegation, and a readiness to lose self in the Master's service—to do what is really best for his service, and, it may be, not even to be seen to do it; and on the part of those who may have to administer any systematic work, whether of a Parish or a Society, to look on that administration as a thing consecrated to the Lord, and so tenderly and wisely to give the fullest possible scope to individual character and effort.

It seems scarcely necessary to add on this point the great necessity of constant watchfulness that we do not lose the grace of humility in the strength of activity—that we do not let our own personal views and plans blind us to our position of responsibility in offering to the Lord (whose we are) a work absolutely consecrated to His service.

But granted that this foundation has been laid, how is it to be worked out in its details? How are we to apply the principle to the individual difficulties that may beset any who read these pages?

The Lord Jesus himself sent out His disciples "two and two" before His face, which at once gives the principle of association in work; and we find St. Paul leaving both Timothy and Titus to superintend the work in the places where they were appointed. This suggests the thought that any who feel drawn to undertake any share of the Master's work, should first communicate with those who are already occupied with it; and naturally, in the first instance, with the Clergyman under whose ministry they are settled. It is *primâ facie* natural that he who teaches as to life should superintend as to work, and that the hands of the Ministry should be upheld by the work of the Christian laity:

where this may be for some sad reason impossible, then it becomes doubly important that work undertaken should be associated with that of some other Christians, and, as far as possible, in definite connection with our Church.

But then comes the other and equally important point—How is the offer of work to be received and treated? Sometimes a Worker has only the desire for work in general, without any special wishes or qualifications; then the Clergymen must endeavour so far to study the character and powers as to put such a one into that sphere of work that is most suitable, but probably only tentatively; for there are few things more unsatisfactory in working and results than for Christian workers to be engaged in uncongenial work, or that for which their own special gifts do not qualify them. Often again some one has a special gift and special experience in a particular line of things, and in such case it is imperative that whoever has the oversight of the work should leave as much as possible to the individual, and should take care to give the utmost freedom of action that is consistent with united work. It may be, indeed, that ideas as to detail may differ considerably; but then, in the spirit of mutual concession, it seems as if the one who has the greatest experience, and on whom the real responsibility devolves, should decide the course to be pursued—provided, of course, that there be no compromise of principle. One thing is very clear—it is not *office* or position that gives competence, and it is by no means seldom that the crude ideas of some young and inexperienced Clergyman become a great hindrance to some old and tried Worker, and are forced upon such a one from the mere assumption of office; whereas true administration will use to the utmost the individuality of each Worker, even insensibly kept in the gentle guidance of Christian fellowship. On the other hand, again, the zealous worker, absorbed in one particular scheme, may be tempted to look on it as the only thing to be done—to mistake a tiny corner for the whole field, and so possibly forget that others have to take a wider range of view, which entails the modification even of some favourite theories.

The subject is one which is of the utmost difficulty, but at the same time of paramount importance; its true solution lies in “dwelling with the King for His work,” in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in everything we undertake, and in keeping very closely united together in the spirit of prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Consecrated work will be exposed to difficulties from without, and will overcome them; unconsecrated work is exposed to difficulties from within, and will sooner or later be broken up by them.

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