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Dealing with Individuals

BY THE REV. CANON BRYAN S. W. GREEN, M.A., B.D.

SPEAKING as an Evangelical to Evangelicals I am glad to have the opportunity of talking on this particular subject of "Dealing with individuals". It is, of course, a subject of great interest and importance to all Christians and to all sections within the Church of England. We cannot really be the followers of Jesus Christ and see people in the mass. We must do as He did, view them as individuals, as brothers for whom He died, and try to win them individually to faith in Him.

This desire to win individuals to Christ we as Evangelicals share with the Anglo-Catholics in our Church; but speaking here together in an Evangelical conference we have certain suppositions and basic ideas in common which enable us to grapple the subject more firmly and decisively than we could do in a wider audience.

Perhaps this is the point where I should register my protest against the increase that is observable in the Church of England of a rigorist and rigid attitude in pastoral work. I am not unmindful that perhaps we who are Evangelicals can learn from others the need for increased discipline in the spiritual life; but at the same time we must be ever ready to fight for what I believe is a basically Christian attitude, namely, that in dealing with individual persons a rigid rigorism often prevents our showing to that individual the Spirit of Christ. You cannot regiment individuals, and while no doubt in the ordered law of society it must arise from time to time that individuals suffer through laws made for the common good, yet within the spiritual body, the Church of God—which is not truly an organization but rather an organism—there must be again and again the loophole by which in dealing with the single person the law is not rigorously applied, and we consider the good of that one soul even if for the moment we may seem to act in a way which would not be right if applied to the whole body.

This emphasis on the individual is needful, too, for those of us who still see a value in mass evangelism, such as the parochial mission or the large interdenominational campaign. If we can bring the masses under the sound of the Gospel, by all means let us do so; but when the Gospel has been proclaimed to the crowd, people must be won to Christ, evangelized, one by one. This encounter, when I meet God and am found by Him through and in Christ, can never be mass produced. Moody was always insistent that what mattered most was to get the preaching over and to meet the individuals in the enquiry room.

In quite another connection, in the secular world, we can observe this danger of seeing people in the mass gradually arising. In the centralized organization of the welfare state it is all too possible that the individual patient, the individual consumer, the individual worker, is forgotten. This warning should be taken to heart, I feel, by those in authority in the Church of God. History makes it perfectly plain

that the Christian Church can be, and has been, influenced by the spirit of the secular world, and without perhaps conscious compromise has adopted an attitude of thought and practice which is not of the mind of Christ but is really of the mind of the world.

For instance, centralized Church finance often seems to me to forget the parishes where the money has to be raised, and Church resolutions on this or that moral subject forget the individual Christians who have to act in this or that moral way. For this reason, if for no other, the assertion must be made, and constantly made, that the Church must ever be mindful of the individual, winning that individual to Christ through true conversion, and building up that individual into a saint within the Church of God, if the Church is to be true to her task.

I

In the practice of dealing with individuals we who are Evangelicals perhaps have certain advantages—at least, I am inclined to think so. We believe in the Sacraments, but we are not tied up with them blindly. We believe in the Church, but we believe that Christ, the Head of the Church, is, if I can put it this way, more essential to be in the forefront of our thinking and speaking than the Body. We would claim the freedom of the Spirit in our practice and in our speaking when dealing with individuals, because we believe that we are led by the Spirit of God as His sons. Dealing with an individual we can be unfettered, to a large extent, by any presuppositions of an ecclesiastical nature. We are free to confront people ignorant of the Sacraments, suspicious and perhaps even hostile to the Church, with Jesus Christ, without—to use a colloquialism—any strings attached in our approach. We need not at this point bring in the priest, nor the Church, nor even the Sacraments. Later, as experience shows, the converted soul within the teaching fellowship of the Church will come to understand and see the need for discipline, for authority, and for that which is external and sacramental.

Approaching our subject more closely we must state that there are no techniques when dealing with individual souls. Anything like a technique or formula for faith would be abhorrent to any of us who are sensitive and who recognize the delicacy of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is God who brings a soul to Himself, and perhaps the one secret of helping a soul in spiritual things is just this—and simply this—to be spiritually sensitive to the way in which the Holy Spirit is breathing upon the person with whom we are in contact, so that we, in all humility, can be used as instruments to co-operate with the Spirit of God along the same lines, working in the same direction. I would not wish to decry a knowledge of psychology—far from it—but I would like to say that I do not think our need as clergy is to know more psychology, nor to understand human nature better, but to possess a deeper spirituality which will help us more completely to know God for ourselves, and because of this deeper knowledge of God, to be instruments in His hands to lead others along the same path.

All generalizations, of course, are incomplete, but perhaps we can say that our contacts as parish priests with individuals are a chief part of our work; and yet many of us would have to confess that we

rarely enjoy the privilege of contact with persons on a spiritual level. So many of us are unapproachable. Evangelical we may be, but not approachable. Our Anglo-Catholic brethren may be unapproachable, too, in their personalities, but they at least appoint a place where they hear regular confessions. If anyone is deeply enough in need, he knows where to find a priest for help, and he will find him there in church—behind a curtain. But in an evangelical church, on the other hand, a seeker for spiritual help would only find the priest on the notice board, and then, if enough in earnest, would find a front door and a door bell, and behind that, in all probability, the vicar's wife.

I am not at all sure that it would not be good if every church adopted as a matter of weekly procedure an arrangement whereby the parson could be seen easily in church by those who want to come on spiritual business. Many of us who try to do this find that if no one comes on any particular occasion we can always use the time profitably. After all, there is always a book to read, or we might even say our prayers!

I know that older men than I assert that one of the reasons for the empty churches is the lack of visiting by the clergy. I am not really inclined to agree with this statement exactly as it stands; but it is true that in an older generation, when the clergy visited house by house, they used to pray and read the Bible with their people. Now I am sure that some way of getting into the homes of the people, and when there speaking and acting as the representative of God, must again become the common practice, if we would make contacts with individuals and do our duty of winning souls for Christ. What this will involve in practice cannot be dealt with in this particular paper, but I rather fancy that it will not mean so much a systematic house-to-house visiting as the seizing of the remote contacts with people which every parson gets, and using these to press home to any who will listen the need for religion, and with some at least to use the opportunity to confront them with the claims of Christ.

II

A number of people will, of course, come to us on their own initiative. In general they will tend to fall into one of four groups.

There will be those who will bring their personal, human problems, such as, for instance, a marriage beginning to fail, a job which lacks purpose, a difficulty created by the illness of a relative. In all these cases our business as Christian ministers is to deal with the problems presented to us. Christian courtesy demands this. We must not, as it were, brush the difficulty on one side and devote ourselves to the conversion of the one who has come to us. We have been honoured by being given the opportunity of helping someone in need. We must accept that privilege and sincerely do our best to help. No doubt we shall bear in mind the possibility that beneath the surface human problem there lies a wrong God-relationship. Then, having begun our conversation by dealing with the problem presented to us, we shall undoubtedly try to show the individual that to get right with God will very likely enable him to get on top of his problem.

Another group who will come to us are the truly converted who are seeking help in the life of sanctification; it may be they want advice

in saying prayers, or counsel that the Holy Communion may become more valuable, and so on. We need to know—and ordinands ought to be taught—how to guide people in different methods of saying their prayers, or reading the Bible, of approaching devotionally the Holy Communion, and of overcoming particular sins. This pastoral ministry is very necessary, and we should all learn how to do it.

The third group are people whom I may call seekers; they are not yet ready to be led into conversion to Christ; pre-evangelism is what they need. They are interested in the Gospel and want to find a faith. What can we tell them? If we suggest that they should read their Bible and thus become acquainted with Jesus Christ, we need to suggest the right passages. A good place to start is with Luke's Gospel, written, as it was, for the Gentile convert. Another suggestion is that they should come to church and learn about Christianity there. Or, as in some parishes, there is the possibility of persuading them to join a group of people who meet as seekers just for the purpose of finding a way of faith through mutual discussion and sharing. A suitable book—but we must take care it is really suitable—is sometimes the right next step, and the seeker can be instructed to read the book and bring it back. This will often lead to a further conversation. Finally, I have been surprised how very often the instruction to "go to God, tell Him that you are seeking, that you want faith; you can't get it for yourself, but if He will give it to you you want it, and that you are willing to be and to do what He shows you", leads the seeker into a real encounter with the Heavenly Father.

The fourth group are those who come ready for conversion. They have been brought to the point where they say—in my words, and not theirs, however—"I want to be reconciled to God here and now". We shall come across such people at the end of a series of Confirmation classes, after a mission, after an evangelistic sermon or youth rally. What do we say to such people?

Our Anglo-Catholic brethren for the most part do not know what to say to such people. Useful as the practice of confession may be in certain circumstances, it is no answer to this situation to suggest to the one wanting to be converted, "Come and make your first Confession".

Many clergy have no idea whatever of what to say. In our theological colleges there is, for the most part, very little genuine teaching on how to lead a soul to Christ. Instruction in pastoral work is well done, in apologetics moderately, in this matter of soul-winning badly. I must pay my tribute in this connection to such agencies as the Children's Special Service Mission, or the Crusaders' Union. They have assisted many of us enormously in this particular piece of work, and we owe them a debt we can never repay. It may be that now, with wider experience, we are forced to admit that there is a certain amount of narrowness in their outlook with which we cannot agree; but we are compelled to admit—and we do it with the utmost gladness and gratitude—that they do know what to say to one who comes saying, "I want to know Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord". The organized Churches should be humble enough to learn much in this respect from these narrow, but finely Christian, groups.

III

Let me remind you briefly of the four principles which must be in our minds as we seek to help individuals in this fourth class. Notice, please, that I have not used the word 'techniques', but 'principles', for, as I have already made plain, anything like a technique or formula for leading a soul to Christ is quite abhorrent. The work of the Spirit which brings alive a soul in Christ can never be tied to man-made phrases, methods, or instructions. Nevertheless, there are certain spiritual principles which we can bear in mind.

First, there must be a sense of need, not necessarily a sense only of neediness. Many come with a superficial sense of need—it may be a sense of loneliness, of moral failure, of sinfulness, of weakness of will, of fear, of lack of purpose, of the overwhelming evil in the world and the accompanying intellectual frustration, and so on. We know that God in Christ will meet these superficial needs, but the mere knowledge of need at this level is not the same thing as conviction of sin. We have got so to explain and present the Bible truth with real challenge that the Holy Spirit will make this seeking individual realize that his basic need is for God Himself. To be ungodly, "without God in the world", is at once man's greatest tragedy and his greatest need. The alienation of man from God is a fact, and it is our business to end it. The godless man is a lost man and is not the man God means him to be. Our first task, then, is so to speak and pray that this materialistically-minded, godless man who is now seeking conversion is led to that most subtle and most radical of spiritual experiences when he cries out, "I am without God. O wretched man that I am! I must have Him". Out of such despair true faith is born.

Sadly enough, many good Christian people have got contaminated by the spirit of the world, and perhaps even unconsciously they do not really deeply believe that man most desperately needs God: that a man cultured, good living, and self-denying in philanthropic service is, if he is without a true personal relationship with God, desperately lacking and tragically in need. Unless we believe that man needs God, and not simply what he can get from God, we shall never really win souls to Christ.

In dealing with people who are conscious of their need, with genuine conviction of sin, the next step is to offer Christ to them. Here we shall offer Him in such a way that they can see that He meets the particular aspect of their superficial need as well as their deep need of God. We must not try to offer the whole Gospel at once or drag in some particular aspect of Christ because it is our favourite, or because we think we are bound to give the whole theology of salvation. If a man becomes alive to God in Christ he will soon discover for himself the unsearchable riches of Christ. The pilgrim entered at the wicket gate, but he soon found himself at the Cross.

The third step will be to lead him into an act of faith. Most people need a focus for their faith, though of course this is not really necessary. A soul in deep need is offered Christ without any instruction or any focus; he may cry out, and in the moment of crying Christ will meet him. But generally we find that we must give some focus for the act

of faith. My own practice, and I know no better, is to use a text of Scripture such as the great promise, "Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out"; or "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him". Without pressure, and very often without our presence, the man who is seeking must be left alone with God to make his own act of faith.

Finally, he will need to receive the assurance that God in Christ has taken hold of him, and that he has been reconciled to God. Many, many times have I had the privilege of being with a man when this happens, but I am still as humbled and still as thrilled as I was the first time when once again I see the light of God shining in a man's eyes, and know that Christ has become real to him. There is an authentic work of God here, and in the presence of it we can only say from our hearts: "Unto Thee, O God, be all the glory. This is Thy doing, and marvellous in our eyes".

We shall, of course, be careful to show the man that the assurance rests upon the promise of God, and not upon his feelings, and that behind the promise of God stands the character of God. Here we shall take him to the Cross and point out that it is in the Cross that we see the character of God shown towards a sinner—utterly righteous, yet completely forgiving—so that we leave the new convert with his faith resting in nothing that is in himself, not in his feelings, nor in his faith, but in the character of God seen in the Cross of Christ. Faith in greater than this is not possible; faith in less is not enough. On another occasion perhaps we shall help the new convert with more advice, but not at that moment. It is important that a man's pride should be utterly broken, and that he should realize that it is nothing that we do, nothing that we have to offer, which brings us to God; only do we find God because God gives Himself to us.

At some point it is a help, I think—and perhaps Evangelicals do not do it enough—to link this idea of assurance with the Holy Communion, for surely one aspect of this great service is that it pledges to us, and assures us of, our acceptance by God and His forgiveness of us. Kneeling on my two knees—my pride humbled—two hands held up completely empty—nothing to offer to God, nothing to plead, nothing to give—into these two hands the broken bread and poured out wine are placed. He gives Himself to me as I am; unless He gives Himself to me I have nothing; all I can do is to receive, and to thank Him for the gift. But every time I take the bread and wine into my empty hands I am afforded once again, by pledges that He Himself ordained, assurance of my salvation, assurance that I am accepted in the Beloved, because into my emptiness He has placed Himself. Now, but not till now, I can offer and present myself unto Him as a holy, reasonable and living sacrifice in the gratitude of glad service.