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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

Is it possible to get rid for ever of the conflict of duties in life? Is it possible to obtain immediate direction from God on every step that has to be taken? The Rev. Basil MATHEWS, M.A., and the Rev. Harry BISSEKER, M.A., believe that it is possible.

Together they have written a book about it. The title is *Christian Fellowship in Thought and Prayer* (Hodder & Stoughton; 2s. 6d. net). And the title is well chosen. For the whole secret lies in that word 'fellowship.' The Christian cannot get rid of his perplexities if he prays alone. He must pray in fellowship. He must think in fellowship. In short, there is a definite method to be followed. And if it is somewhat elaborate who will grudge the elaborateness if it ends in reality and rest?

First of all, 'a company of men and women meet together that they may seek that richer consciousness of God, and, with it, that clearer light upon truth or conduct, their need of which has been impressed upon them. The first requirement is that their power of receptivity shall be intensified. Of God's willingness to lead them there is no question. The only point of uncertainty is in their ability to discern and to respond to His direction. Therefore they will begin with earnest and united prayer. This prayer will not be hurried; it will

be a sustained act of communion. And therein they will desire four things.'

'First, they will together wait in silence for a more vivid sense of God's Presence and Reality. In the strain and bustle of ordinary life the vision of the unseen may easily grow dim; they will tarry in stillness before God, craving the penitence and cleansing through which it may once more be made clear to them. Next, they will together pray for the coming of the Kingdom. This will be no light and easy intercession; they will reverently strive to view men from God's own standpoint, and, so far as may be, to enter into His sorrow for the world's sin and His sympathy with the world's need. And when they have thus learnt a little less imperfectly to see mankind as God sees it, alike in its transgressions and in its ultimate possibilities, they will at last be ready, in the third place, to ask for light on the particular matter in which they need the Divine illumination. They will therefore pray together that in this special situation God's own design may be made plain to them. Lastly, that all hindrance in themselves may be removed, they will seek, before they turn to examine the problem, to be freed from every form of self-assertion. In the consciously realized presence of God, and relying on His aid, they will try to expel from their minds all previous bias, all personal preferences and all self-seeking motives,

and at whatever cost, to will God's will both for themselves and for the world.'

Now in all this the one essential matter is that the prayer is offered in an atmosphere of fellowship. This has been found to be essential in experience. There are also good reasons for it. 'The group of men engaged is more than a mere collection of individuals; it is a body of believers—a small but essential section of that living organism which is the Church of Christ, Himself its living Head. On this account the entire spiritual efficiency alike of every part and of the whole is immeasurably increased. Because of its mystical union with its fellows and with the Head, each separate member acquires a power never possessed and never attainable in isolation. The prayer of each, his penitence, his consecration, his very experience of God's Presence, is deepened and enriched by those of all; and, in its turn, "through that which every joint supplieth" the entire body is itself built up in love.'

But fellowship in prayer is only the first part of the method. There must be also fellowship in deliberation. The men who have tried the method and found it workable are not quietists. They do not depreciate intelligence. They do not trust to vague and irrational impulses. 'We have met with no assemblies of men by whom the duty of sincere and resolute thinking is more clearly apprehended. True, their ultimate reliance is upon a wisdom higher than their own. Christ's promise that His Spirit shall guide them into all the truth they believe to be, not merely a beautiful ideal, but also a practical fact on which they may safely count. None the less, beneath this confidence in a heavenly guidance there dwells no lurking hostility to human reason. The inference drawn is rather that, since God has made us rational beings, it is through our minds that He will most naturally lead us. Therefore, prepared by united communion, they turn in their search for God's will to a frank and determined discussion.'

Then there is the third thing. It is the important part of the method. It is also the most difficult. Those men who meet for prayer and deliberation put away from them all self-assertion. Have they their own ideas about God's government? They set them aside. Have they prejudices in favour of 'particular providences'? Or against? They resolutely rid their minds of them. They are ready to revise all their earlier conclusions by any new light that God may reveal to them.

And here more than elsewhere appears the value of the fellowship. For 'no one man's mind, however cultivated and sincere, can perceive the whole truth, whether in relation to conduct or in relation to thought. As the physical light, falling on various objects, is reflected in various shades of colour, each but a partial presentation of its great original, so the light of truth, reflected from men's different minds, is found to exhibit many different aspects, in no single one of which can truth's perfect image be discerned. In the second case, as in the first, the pure white light is gained only when all these partial reflections are combined. Each individual's view needs to be checked and supplemented by the view of his fellows.

'It is not merely that no separate human being ever has attained a¹ perfect wisdom; as a separate human being he never can attain it. He has been so made that he will find his fullest life only in fellowship with others—a fact which applies to his intellectual life as well as to life in all its other phases. As, then, he seeks to form right judgments, he has no power, even if he had the will, to be strictly independent. He was born a member of a body, and not even in his thinking has he the right to say to another, "I have no need of thee."

'That being the case, men who are seeking God's guidance in any given situation, and believe that their minds are the instruments through which He is wont to direct them, will be eager to welcome light from every possible angle. It will be assumed that no single point of view contains the whole

truth which God is waiting to reveal; and this will be acknowledged even by those among whom that point of view may be most strongly maintained. But it will also be assumed that every point of view adopted by an honest thinker will probably embody some aspect of the truth—an aspect which, however partial or exaggerated, yet cannot safely be neglected in the final synthesis; and this fact will be freely recognized even by those who regard that standpoint with the utmost initial prejudice. In other words, the path to truth, whether in thought or in action, lies along the line of accepting light from every quarter—even from that with which at first we have the least degree of sympathy—and in focussing these scattered rays into as real a unity as we are then able to attain.'

What is the result? The result is clear and definite guidance of God. 'Baldly stated in black and white, this truth may seem somewhat vague and unconvincing: experienced in actual practice, its impressiveness is at times almost startling, and some of its definite results have been remarkable. For when self-assertion has once been forsaken, and through its removal men's minds are at last made truly receptive, a very real and precious fellowship in thought is rendered possible. Mind acts freely on mind, each in its turn exploring, checking, challenging the other. The thought of each is quickened and stimulated. It rises to possibilities as yet unrealized in its moments of solitary activity. Exaggerations are corrected, deficiencies supplied, the sense of proportion duly adjusted. And in the process many earlier differences of view are found to disappear. A perceptible *rapprochement* is effected, and in the end a measure of agreement reached which at the outset would have appeared in the highest degree improbable. It is in this way that, as each individual thinker approaches nearer to a common centre, the wonderful phenomenon of *corporate thought* is experienced.' This corporate thought is thereupon accepted as the voice of God.

There are two subjects beyond all others (except

the preaching of the gospel of the grace of God) to which we must now give ourselves. The one is the doctrine of the Future State. The other is the doctrine of God's Providence. And of these two the doctrine of God's Providence is the easier and the more urgent.

It is the more urgent. For the doctrine of Providence has to do with the things of this life, and even in Scripture the things of this life receive attention before the things of the life to come. And it is easier. For a true doctrine of God's Providence can be set forth in a single sermon, but it takes many sermons and much wisdom to set forth a strengthening doctrine of the Future Life.

The Rev. W. PERRY, B.D., Principal and Pantonian Professor of the Theological College of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, has written a book on *Providence and Life* (Edinburgh: Scottish Chronicle Press; 3s. 6d. net). It is a good guide to the preacher and sufficient for all suggestive purposes. But to set forth the true doctrine of God's Providence a single chapter in the book is sufficient—even a single incident in that chapter.

It is the incident of the healing of the epileptic boy. 'The scene so vividly described in the pages of St. Mark has received noble artistic expression at the hands of Raphael. In his familiar picture the canvas is divided into two parts across the middle. In the upper half is represented the Transfiguration—heaven open, and the Kneeling Christ glorified in the Light of the Eternal Father. In the lower half is depicted a miniature hell on earth, a gaping crowd surrounding a poor epileptic boy who is falling into one gruesome fit after another. Our Lord is the centre of the scene above; He is absent from the scene below. It is the disciples who are in the foreground there; but they stand utterly helpless before the object of piteous misery in front of them. The picture of human impotence is complete; the call for a quick descent of Divine power is imperious.'

It is the old question, you see—so old and yet so pitiably new. Why did God not stop the War? Why did God permit it to begin? Why did He allow so many men to suffer and die, so many women to suffer and live?

Well—‘Into this scene of abject misery our Lord passes from His sojourn on the mount, and we might suppose that His first and sole concern would be to sweep out of sight this damning disproof of the goodness of God. But the instant He appears it is clear that His interest is concentrated not so much on the cure of the suffering boy as on the restoration and reinforcement of the father’s faith. The latter is unconscious till the end, that he, not the boy, is the real patient. He pours out with no stint of detail the story of his child’s symptoms: “He teareth him; and he foameth and gnasheth with his teeth and pineth away.” His mind, indeed, seems to have room for nothing but the fearful effects of the disease; for, when questioned as to its duration, he begins all over again. “Ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire and into the waters to destroy him.” Clearly, he is quite unconscious that anything is wrong with *him*.’

So were the men who fought the war for us. They were quite unconscious that there was anything wrong with *them*. They had not willed the war. They had not begun it. They were doing their utmost possible to end it. How could they think that anything was wrong with *them*?

But this man and the men who fought were at one in this: when the trouble came they went to the highest they knew for relief. Mr. Harrington Lees tells us that in a certain factory where complicated machinery is in use, the instructions given in the workrooms are, ‘If your threads get tangled send for the foreman.’ When the war and its hideousness became inexplicable the men in the trenches (some of them at any rate) sent for God.

In the volume entitled *The Army and Religion*,

edited by Professor CAIRNS, this is quoted from one of the correspondents: ‘I was sitting at a table one night drinking coffee and listening to the men talking of the fearful experiences out of which they had just come. And one man, evidently respected by the rest, said, “I bet you that there is not a man who was in Delville Wood that night who is an atheist.” I did not say what I thought, though I confess I should have thought that Delville Wood was enough to make any man an atheist, and probably it and the like of it have darkened the lives of many. The men themselves had described it as “hell,” which surely is the denial of God, and yet, curiously enough, here was a man challenging a dozen men around him that nobody who had been in Delville Wood could doubt God. I thought that perhaps it was just the sense of gratitude that he had come out of it safely that made him say it. So I said, “Why do you say that?” He replied, “There wasn’t a man who didn’t pray that night.” “No,” said another, “we all said our prayers that night.” “Well?” I said, wanting him to go on. “Well,” he added, “when a man does pray, it makes all the difference.”’

The father of the epileptic sent for the foreman. ‘I spake unto thy disciples that they should cast it out and they were not able.’ But now, ‘If *thou* canst do anything.’

It is the ‘if’ of distrust and failure. Our Lord throws it back on the suppliant—‘If I can? If *thou* canst’—that is the condition. ‘If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that “believeth.”’ And the man sees at last that in some way or other it does depend upon him. ‘Lord, I believe,’ he cries, ‘help thou mine unbelief.’

‘No longer,’ says Canon PERRY, ‘does he plead for mere escape from misery through Divine power. His cry now is for that spirit which will sustain him in it. He understands that his own spiritual condition is of more consequence than his relief from trial. He has reached a new view of Christ and of the working of Providence.’

He has discovered that 'Christ's first concern is not the disappointments and misfortunes of life, but the men and women who are suffering from them. God's responsibility for man is best discharged, not by taking the load from his shoulders, but by awaking and maintaining in him the faith and courage that will enable him to bear his own burden. To him that believeth all things are possible.'

CANON PERRY turns to Browning for confirmation. For 'Browning has made this aspect of human life the theme of much of his best writing. In the *Ring and the Book*, Pompilia, the child wife of Count Guido, is a mere puppet in the hands of a heartless fate, tossed from one misfortune to another, till at last she lies stabbed to death by the hand of her brutal husband. Yet in the midst of her misery she can say,—

"God for our good makes the need extreme,
Till at last He puts forth might and saves."

But He does not save, for Pompilia in the end is the victim of a foul murder. Still, "God for our good makes the need extreme," and the issue clears up the mystery; for, when Guido goes to his doom it is his dead wife's name that rises to his lips in his appeal for deliverance, and that appeal—"Pompilia, will you let them murder me?"—is also a proof that he, too, has at last found his soul.

The greatest service yet rendered to the Church to equip her for the task to which she has been called by Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the task of reconstructing the shattered world, and so completing the work which the army by its victory began—the greatest service, we say, yet rendered is rendered by a volume which Messrs. Macmillan have published under the title of *The Army and Religion* (6s. net).

While the war was going on—it was sometime, we think, in 1916—a committee was formed for the purpose of eliciting from the officers and men

engaged in it their attitude to Religion and the Church. A Questionnaire was prepared and widely circulated among them. 'Nearly three hundred memoranda, often of considerable length, resting on the evidence of many hundred witnesses, were thus obtained from men of all ranks, generals down to privates, chaplains, doctors, nurses, hut leaders and workers, and also from Committees appointed at the great Bases in England and France to collect evidence.' That mass of memoranda was then sifted and classified, and by means of that undaunted painstaking which is called genius this book was prepared and published.

The book has been edited, and for the most part written, by Professor David S. CAIRNS. That means something. It means that no sectional interest, either theological or ecclesiastical, will be allowed to disturb the balance of its truthfulness. And it means that it is literature.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part contains the information regarding the religion of the army furnished by the Committee's many correspondents. The second part contains the comments and conclusions of Professor CAIRNS and his Committee upon that information. The information is quoted with admirable restraint and readableness. And it is quoted in sufficient and really final fullness. This is the first value of the book. Very many chaplains, doctors, officers of all ranks, and men of all arms, have already told us what they think of the Christianity that is professed in our land and of those who profess it. But it has been mere nibbling. Now we can say that if the mind of the British army is worth reaching it has been reached. If the beliefs or unbeliefs of those who won the war for us are to be of any service in the building of that Jerusalem in our pleasant land on which our hearts are so poignantly placed, those beliefs and also those unbeliefs are at last before us.

Here is a central sentence: 'As a whole they are religious, but not Christian.' It comes from a

Presbyterian chaplain. It refers to the men of a Scottish division. The chaplain goes on to explain: 'The men, as a rule, are not hostile to the Christian religion, but are rather indifferent. They regard it as impracticable and inefficient. Most of the men believe in God, but have only a fitful sense of their need of Him. It is His help they seek more than fellowship with Him. They do not realize as they ought their personal relationship to Jesus Christ. He appears to them rather as an historical figure than as a presence and power in their lives.'

That is not the worst of the story. It is nearly the best. From other divisions freely, and from Scottish divisions also, there comes the evidence of practical materialism, and still more of utter and almost impervious indifference. Says the editor: 'The greatly prevailing drift of the evidence is that the men as a whole take a material view of life.' And again: 'It is true that, under the present conditions, the men prevailingly appear to take a material as opposed to a spiritual view of life. In spite of all that has been said of the experiences of the Line, it would be a great misunderstanding of the situation to think of the mass of men as pre-occupied with religion. This is what has made the highly-coloured pictures of a "revival of religion at the Front" so untrue and so pernicious. If we are basing our hopes for religion in the future on the idea that the men are going to set the Churches on fire with a new zeal for religion, we shall assuredly be disappointed. There will be a new and wonderful opportunity for reaching and deeply moving these men, which the Churches may see and use, but it is highly doubtful if there will be more. For our witnesses generally testify that, to all appearances, material interests have everywhere seemed to prevail over spiritual.'

The materialism is practical. It is not theoretical. 'All our accounts go to show that theoretic materialists are very few indeed.' Moreover, the materialism is on the surface. 'In the main,' says the editor, 'one gets the impression

that there lies on the mind of the young manhood of our country a hard crust of materialism, beneath which there are great depths of idealism, of humanity, and of religion. The crust is strained and broken in great experiences. There comes to them some drastic summons to heroic sacrifice and daring, and in response to it there is an upheaval of latent spiritual power, and for the moment the commonplace, pleasure-loving man becomes a hero. He gives his life away for a spiritual end.'

It is so with the indifference also. Widespread as it is, and seemingly insurmountable, it vanishes as a cloud the moment the call comes to some great act of surrender or some high test of endurance. It is due to two almost universally prevalent and all-prevailing causes.

What are these causes? The inconsistent lives of Christian people is not one of them. Not a few of the men who went to the war went there with the belief that professing Christians were not better than others, and worse than others because of their profession. But the war destroyed that belief. The Christian officer or private was found to be all the better for his Christianity. He was as good a soldier and he was better as an officer or a comrade. What are the causes of the men's indifference to religion? Their ignorance of the Bible and misunderstanding of Christianity.

Ignorance of the Bible, that is to say, of the elementary facts and truths of religion, was found to be both widespread and abysmal. Misapprehension of the nature of Christianity was found to be almost universal and almost ineradicable. Take the latter alone.

Says this faithful reporter: 'There is no more startling fact revealed in the evidence than this, and certainly none that should more rouse the Churches to some sense of their own failures and shortcomings. What are they in the land for, except to manifest Christ to the mind and heart of

the nation? Why are they in the positions of vantage which they occupy, but for this end? If it is the definition of a saint that he is in the world to make it easier for other men to believe in God, is this not true of the Christian Church in even fuller measure? Yet after so many centuries we find this baffling ignorance. There is something here for us all to consider deeply.'

But just because it is ignorance Professor CAIRNS finds room for hope in it. For, as he says, 'there is a profound difference between ignorance and apostasy.' And 'a quarrel which rests upon a misunderstanding is much more easily healed than one which rests upon antagonism.' And he adds: 'Grave as the whole situation undoubtedly is, it would be incomparably graver were it not for the fact that at the heart of it there is this element of far-reaching misunderstanding. It is not claimed here that this is a misunderstanding of the Churches as they are. No doubt there is this also to some extent. But the point is that there is a deep and far-reaching misunderstanding of what the Christian revelation is, and an equally grave misunderstanding of the Christian life, and that this misunderstanding is one which it is the first duty of the Church to do all in its power to remove.'

How is the Church to do it? The answer is in the one word, *interpretation*. The truths of Christianity are there, and they are truths. But they need interpretation. They need such interpretation as shall make them intelligible to the minds of ordinary men. This demand runs right through the volume. Many of the officers see its necessity clearly, many of the men feel it dimly. At last the editor urges it with all the momentum of this vast mass of evidence behind him. What does he say?

'The whole life of the Church,' he says, 'depends on its fundamental faiths about God and the world and the soul, the Person and Work of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Kingdom

of God, and the Life to come. Now it is quite clear that this teaching, in spite of all that has been done by the ministry of the Church and by the various systems of religious education followed in the schools, has never been taken home as a whole by the great masses of the manhood of the country. They have taken home parts of it, or these have been revealed to them for the first time by the experiences of the war, but they are broken fragments without unity or cohesion.

'This is in large part due to the fact that most of the men have never really understood the things that they have been taught. Where the Christian doctrines have been taught they seem to have been taught as something out of relation to their lives, which has to be believed as a duty rather than as a revelation which makes reason of the riddle of human life. It is a very frequent thing in our evidence to find the need for "interpretation" insisted on, the explanation of what Christ and His salvation really mean. This implies that Christian truth is at present taught in a foreign tongue which has been learned by rote but never understood. Hence in the great convulsion of the war it has been simply dropped, as something quite without use, and out of all relation to the urgent facts, "just as on a forced march a Bible will be left out of a kit-bag by a man who does not understand and love it," or else retained only as a mascot.

'Now, if the present divorce is really to be overcome it is absolutely vital that this should be set right. We are here dealing with something which is fundamental. The Church will have to put its very heart and soul into the work of restating the great faiths by which it lives and from which it draws all its inspiration in terms which the men can understand. The frequent demand for "interpretation" is in truth a demand for the vitalizing of theology, for the restatement of Christian doctrines in terms of life.

'This is a very different thing from abandoning these truths in order to make the Faith plausible

and easy to believe, or to take a "greatest common measure" of the working faiths of existing Churches and men as representing essential Christianity. That would be almost as fatal as to lower the standard of Christian conduct in order to make it easier for men to practise. It would be the same kind of apostasy and have the same ruinous consequences. But the great Christian verities are so great that they have many aspects. Every one of them was revealed at the first in order to meet certain practical necessities. To-day every one of them is capable of being brought home to the mind of the simplest, if we can find the true points of contact with him.'

And then come these incisive words—for God's sake let us lay them to heart: 'The hardest and deepest thinking that the Churches can put into this matter is essential. The best men will not be put off with any superficial and *ad captandum* treatment. The sooner we realize that the men want thoroughness, reality, and candour, the better will it be for all. Perfunctory teaching by men

who have never felt the cutting edge of the problem will be of no avail with the men who will really be the leaders of the generation after the war. Men who have seen their comrades dissolved by high explosives will want to know what are the reasons for believing in immortality, and what is their present state. Men who have lived in the shambles and putrefaction of the Salient and the trenches at Souchez will want to know how they can remember these things and believe in Almighty Love. They will want to know why prayer in danger gave them such intense relief, and why it seemed so often to be unanswered. They will probably give the Churches a chance again in order to see if they have anything vital and comprehensible to say. If they do not get it from professional teachers of religion, they will take their own road once more. We may be quite sure that most of them will not take their faith on mere authority, or be content with superficialities uttered by men who have never either in body or soul suffered along with them, or with them battled for faith in the wild revel of Sin and Death of these awful years.'

The Church's Message for To-day.

BY THE REVEREND ARCHIBALD HENDERSON, D.D., PRINCIPAL OF THE UNITED FREE CHURCH COLLEGE, GLASGOW.

THE question is being often asked, 'Have the divided branches of the Church of Christ no message which they can unite in delivering to this war-torn world?' Though they cannot agree as to the terms in which to express their Faith in Jesus Christ, and however differently they interpret their duty to Him, however imperfectly they fulfil it, they are at one in acknowledging Him as the risen and glorified Saviour, the Lord and Judge of all men. It is impossible for any who accept the authority of the New Testament to differ as to this. Some more constantly regard Him as the Prophet, others as the Great High Priest of His people; may not all at such a time as this unite to proclaim Him and to persuade the world to own Him as the King and Lord of all? It was revealed

to the Seer of Patmos that it is the divine purpose which controls and triumphs through the wars and trials of this present world that there shall be established in it 'the salvation and the power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ.' This may seem a pithless commonplace not worth stating because every Christian allows it. But to allow it as a fact is not to accept it as the rule of life. It is well to remind ourselves at such a time of how it is the keynote of our Lord's last command to His Church: 'All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I