

THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE OF THE MISSIONARY

CIRCUMSTANCES have been so ordered that the writer of this paper has a large and intimate correspondence with missionaries of the younger generation in almost every mission field. As is natural, letters often contain definite request for definite intercession; more frequently they are the free expression of those thoughts and desires which are uppermost in the minds of the writers at the time of writing. Missionary matters whether of constant or of immediate interest are freely discussed; and the consideration of the correspondence as a whole might give a very fair indication of the younger missionary mind, and of the uppermost missionary desire, at any given time.

There is one subject which recurs constantly and with great urgency of feeling, explicitly as a matter for serious consideration or implicitly as it is found deeply to concern the whole of life and relationship and service—the subject of the devotional life. How to secure for the quiet hour with God its due place in an over-crowded day, and how best to use it when secured, are anxious considerations with a large number of men and women in every field. Many indeed frankly refer both their own feebleness as missionaries, and the comparative inadequacy of missionary result to missionary endeavour in the larger sphere, almost entirely to one cause, failure, both individually and collectively, to make the leisure and rightly to use the leisure, for daily communion with God.

This indeed is the cause, in the first place, of all inadequacy in service—the tendency to conventionalize the

message of the Gospel and in particular the devotional side of it; the failure 'to make the Gospel live'; the problem of the choice between the opportunities which crowd upon the staff, some of which must be set aside for lack of workers; the lack of spirituality in the young Church.

Secondly, it is the cause of all failure in the relational life—the lack of unity of purpose; the tendency to press personal opinion and desire rather than the larger good of the whole body; the lack of spiritual communion between colleagues; and the 'strained relations' which so frequently and so terribly mar the service.

Thirdly, and above all, it is the cause of all personal failure—the tendency to settle into ruts; the lack of staying power; the frequent slackness of the whole being; the irritability, impatience, over-anxiety. A few quotations from letters will illustrate what is meant.

'I would need to have time to pray until love burns away the sloth, and the weariness, and the sin.'

'Our greatest need is grace to resist the temptation to do more than we can do in the right spirit; and to crush out with actual work the time which should be spent in waiting upon God in quietness. When we stop to think at all we realize that it is what we are and not what we do that counts, but we are often too busy to stop and think. The opportunities for work are very great, and the workers are very few; and it is often difficult to decide what must be left undone.'

'The want of quiet is at the root of all my failure; and the struggle to get it is sometimes desperate.'

'How it makes one long for the power of language and of spirit. Both are very difficult to acquire; hospital work is a great drain upon time and energy, especially as it is impossible to keep up medical study. Since I have been able to think about the future of the work here, I am acutely alive to the fact that it is not costing me enough spiritually. It must, even if some of the work has to go.'

'I am afraid of losing sight of the Vision while teaching English, arithmetic and geography at the same hours every day, week after week. Is it not hard to shake oneself up, and to look out for "the glory and the gleam" in each lesson? I have no doubt it is there if only one had eyes to see.'

Clearly, we are not here in the region of theory; we

are in the region where prayerful, humble, and if possible practical consideration is required. Only in such wise can the writer, herself a missionary, and herself but a learner, venture to approach it; and she does so here as in some sort her reply to the personal letters to which she has referred.

No man or woman, at home or abroad, who knows anything at all of the present missionary situation will question that if this problem exists, the solution of it must lie heavily upon the conscience of the whole Church. The life of the missionary of the twentieth century is beset with subtle and constant dangers, dangers of a nature quite unknown to the pioneer missionary of many adventures and sufferings. The burden of the Lord as borne by him falls heavily upon him, for he works amidst changing conditions, not only for his own day, but for a future which even the man of clearest vision cannot perceive or foretell. He must bring out of his treasure-house things old indeed, but also things new, things hitherto unknown; and all the time there is 'hard work and routine work' of which Father Congreve truly says that 'it can only be sustained by communion with God.' If prayer in these conditions, or in any conditions, be anything it must be everything. If the purpose of God be in the missionary movement He must move in the heart of it, in great adventure and also in hourly task. If the Lord Christ be our Master and Leader He must be consulted in large policy and also in the next question of detail which arises. If the missionary is rightly to represent and to introduce Jesus Christ our Lord as the Saviour into all holy living, the Reconciler of all conflicting passions and forces, the Fulfiller of all high human desire, the true and only Hope of the world's restitution, he must be so possessed of Him that there can be no mistake regarding the truth of his Gospel. Himself must be the living illustration, himself indeed the very instrument of the

mystic power which he is there to reveal. Now, the Christian belief is that the only preparation for and method of such high service is that the Christian should dwell with his Lord in all quietness of spirit; for thus only is the intrusive element of self driven out, the strain of living relaxed, and the whole being set free from rule to live in love; and that which is true of the individual is true also of the community. The difficulties which beset us in striving after such a life of inward devotion are confessedly very great, they are great everywhere and for every soul; but there is no question that they must be faithfully met, and dealt with, and overcome, if the kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

When we turn to the consideration in detail of the difficulties which beset us in striving after the prayer life, we shall probably be compelled at the outset to acknowledge that not the circumstantial difficulties of time and opportunity—although these are serious enough—but rather the difficulties which inhere in the life itself, must engage our attention. We know instinctively as well as by experience that rightly to enter into fellowship with God in acts of devotion is not, and cannot be easy; that prayer must be an absorbing and strenuous exercise which demands the concentration of the whole being; and alas, we of the Protestant orders are untrained. We have to find our way unaided, as best we may, from the simple place of desire and need, through the intricacies of long and heart-searching experience, to the quiet resting-place of an assured life with God which hardly needs expression in act.

Let us look at these difficulties more closely. They seem practically to resolve themselves into phases of one supreme difficulty of our modern life, the difficulty of self-discipline: the discipline of preparation, that resolute shutting of the door of the spirit upon distractions of every sort, and shutting ourselves in alone with God,

until body, mind, and spirit are, so to speak, united in themselves and in Him; the discipline of recollection and of intention, a patient survey in His presence of all those matters which lie between Him and us; the discipline of articulation, so difficult to the reserve of our western natures that we are constantly tempted to shirk prayer or to take refuge in a phraseology of prayer which may indeed mean much, but may, as we all know, mean less than nothing; the discipline of a glad acceptance of the probable costliness of the response which we shall meet, a costliness which we often fear to encounter; the discipline of faith, whereby we pray, and believe, and leave; and lastly—although we have by no means exhausted the disciplinary experience of such a life—the discipline of the will, for we tend to take a cowardly refuge from effort in pleading with God for those things which we know that He must desire more than we do, and would bring to pass if we gave ourselves to the exercise of a patient and determined willing of ourselves into His most blessed Will.

Self-discipline, then, seems to be the urgent call which comes to us in this connexion. Through discipline, indeed, even the external circumstantial difficulties may be met. These are admittedly the result of overwork and overstrain, they are not insurmountable. If time and place be made in the daily routine—even it may seem at grave expense to work or needful rest—for quiet, unhasting, uninterrupted communion with God, the immediate reward will be twofold: problems of overwork will solve themselves in His presence; and the quiet hour will itself become a constant source of renewal of strength and courage and love. It was a very busy missionary who was wont to say, ‘Our Master never asks of us so heavy labour as shall leave us no leisure for sitting at His Feet.’

At this point it may be necessary to note that the discipline to which we are all called must be applied in each individual case with forethought and wisdom. For

example, the overwork and overstrain are in many cases present, and these are among the conditions under which the moral exercise which we commonly understand by the term self-discipline would be fatal as regards the end in view. Discipline in such circumstances—circumstances which, be it remembered, should never have arisen—might consist for a time simply in a short season of silence, which must not be interrupted, in the sacred corner of our chamber which has become associated with such articulate communion as we have had. Probably there must be a resolute relaxation of the body for a few preparatory moments, and a resolute quieting of the mind in such manner as is found to be most natural to us, whether it be that we listen for the Master's own comfortable words which summon us to rest in Him, or that we approach Him ourselves in words familiar and dear, or that we make a simple but definite act of handing ourselves and our burdens over to His care, the act of a weary nestling child. To each his own method, if it be remembered that the end which we have in view is not physical rest, but preparation for the fellowship of the King. Some preparatory relaxation there may be, but there can be no dissipation. It is God we seek, not rest; and relaxation having served its purpose, we must brace ourselves, body, mind, and spirit, to our true attitude and act of worship. Even here aids are needful to many, and these lie in our hand in the wealth of devotional literature which forms so large a part of our religious heritage, in the hymns of the Church Catholic, and above all in the Psalter. We venture to suggest to any who have not made such use of it, that no exercise of prayer brings us more near to the heart of God, or to the fellowship of our blessed Lord, or to the centre of our own great need as missionaries, than to repeat, phrase by phrase, in whole or in part, deliberately, with intention of our own and our peoples' and the world's salvation, that prayer which is indeed the guide to all prayer. The very concentration of its content, which forms a difficulty to

those who use it casually, becomes to those who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and of the conscious need of the day, use it as the basis of their worship and intercession, a means of spiritual quickening, enlargement, and uplifting, which is wonderful in its working. Lastly, and above all these aids to the prayer life, the missionary has at his command that needful and gracious gift which our Lord Himself has provided in the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood.

The end in view is that the act of worship and intercession shall become to every missionary not only the central act of his personal life, but the central act of his missionary calling. We are in the midst of our people that we may attain for them and with them to the height of the holy purpose of God. Therefore our labour in their behalf, our happy fellowship with them, every experience of our life among them, are gain only as we carry them into the place of intercession, where, in presence of the Father, theirs and ours, we sorrow over their estrangement, yearn after their return, and, hand in hand with the Saviour of us all, go forth again to win them.

In this connexion reference must be made to another of the difficulties of the devotional life which arises out of our constitutional shyness. We do not like when interrupted to confess that this is the hour of our quiet time with God. It would be well if the closed door were made a more natural and simple thing; and it would especially be well for our people, who know that we reckon ourselves their servants for Jesus' sake, that we should carry them with us, not only by training them into the devotional life as we have ourselves learnt it, but by resolutely insisting that our own hour, so essential to that service, should be unbroken. From the experience of one missionary we are able to say that the day upon which, at some cost, she took all her fellow-workers into her confidence as to her own need was the day of the beginning of a fellowship such as she had never even imagined.

There is still one other suggestion, which is offered in all humility. We have many missionary conferences, with much and needful discussion of the work, and comparison of experience. Is it not possible that we have in the past depended too greatly upon much conference with occasional prayer?—that when we have met we have not always been silent enough to hear God speak? For in the end of the day it is not we who work, but He; and if we were to associate Him, through Quiet Days and otherwise, with all our conference, we should surely have more frequent opportunity than we have ever yet had of standing still and seeing His salvation.

It must not be forgotten that in all this matter a heavy responsibility rests upon those whose work lies at the home base, and this in three main directions.

First, in the preparation of missionaries. Much consideration has been devoted to this department of the service since the World Missionary Conference. The Board of Study has laboured diligently; conferences for the discussion of the best methods of training have been held; schools for candidates have done excellent though insufficient work; missionary colleges have been rectifying their methods and curricula. But, as we believe, the chief part of missionary preparation consists in a very careful and prayerful and pertinent dealing with this first of all needs. Every candidate for the mission field should be sent out as fully conscious as may be of future danger and future need as regards his devotional life; and he should receive such preparatory assistance as is possible. In this direction we must humbly acknowledge that we have very much to learn from our brethren of the Roman Catholic missionary orders.

Secondly, it is impossible to overstate the responsibility of the Church for the under-staffing, and consequent overworking of the men and women on the mission field. If, as we believe, our missionaries stand, not for the

amount of their work, but for their capacity in their person and in their work to reveal Jesus Christ the divine indwelling Lord, a very heavy charge lies against the home Churches if conditions be such as that they cannot so reveal Him. Such letters as were quoted at the beginning of this paper ought to form an appeal of the most convincing kind to those who are taking lightly their part of the task of bringing in the kingdom of God.

Thirdly, that which is true of the devotional life of the missionary is true in almost equal degree of the Church at home. We need above all things a vision of the purpose of God for His world. What might be the result, for example, if we should cease for one month, for one week, over the whole of Christendom, to pray our daily prayer for the conversion of the nations, a prayer offered with desire and in many cases with wrestling and with tears, and should turn our intercessory hours, private and public, into a united determined effort to see the world, in its parts and in the manifold aspects of its need, with the eyes of God? The effort would be terrific in the beginning, but would become less and less so as we became accustomed to the exercise of the imagination; while on the other hand our hearts would become penitent, and humble, and very tender towards Him and towards His children; our formal desire would become an absorbing passion; the Name, Kingdom, Will of the Father would acquire wonderful and hitherto undreamt-of meanings; the problem of the redemption of the world would be on the very eve of its solution.

A. H. SMALL