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UNDERSTANDING THE UNGODLY

By the REV. HUGH EVAN HOPKINS

Vicar of St. Mary-le-Bow, London

THERE had been an argument in the town. It did not directly involve many people, but everyone was prepared to express an opinion. The local paper splashed great headlines about it. For several weeks afterwards the correspondence columns were full of comments, mostly acid. To an ordinary observer, the vicar had done no good to himself, his church, or the Christian cause generally, by 'going off the handle' as he did in his parish magazine. Of course there had been provocation. Even clergy sometimes run short of patience. It certainly was annoying that the local Women's Institute had decided to run a coach trip during Sunday School hours, and thereby deprive half a dozen children of one Sunday's none too expert, but none the less sincere, Christian teaching. They could hardly be expected to prefer an hour in church to an afternoon at Brighton. It all seemed trivial to most of the readers of the local paper, but was it?

This is no imaginary story. The local vicar did write strongly about the organizers of this trip whom he had found it easier to deal with at a distance than by a friendly talk in their office. The result was widespread and increased antipathy to the church. But what was really serious was that it led to a strong reaction against Christianity itself. When this sort of thing happens, evangelistic work, never easy, is thereby made still more difficult. It was all very sad, but was it really necessary? We are not concerned with the rights or wrongs of Sunday coach trips organized by people who have nothing else to do on Sundays, and attended occasionally by some who ought to be in church. What was disturbing about this incident was the spirit that lay behind it — and which lies behind the attitude of so many 'godly' people towards those who do not go to church. 'The church is there and they won't come', is the argument; 'they use us for a convenience when they want to be christened, married or buried, but only then.' 'It's time they were properly told off,' says the vicar in final exasperation.

THE WRONG WAY

But is it right to wave a wand and say 'The church is here, come along please'? If we understood our fellow men better and lived closer to them, we would learn the reasons why the Church leaves them cold. As often as not the fault lies in the fact that we seem to be a class apart, cut off from the culture and interests of the average man, our heads so high in the clouds that we cannot be genuinely interested in the world on which our feet have, perforce, to rest.

The greatest weakness in all evangelistic work, whether amongst students or in the context of church life, is that the Christians just do not understand, and seldom try to understand, those who do not share their faith. We look down on them for their paganism, without pausing to consider their upbringing. We are shocked by their worldliness, but forget their background. We are amazed that they do not come to our gatherings, but will not face the fact that if they liked us more they might give our meetings a chance. When we do achieve the unexpected and get someone to a Christian service or meeting, as often as not the speaker is as ignorant as we are of the strains and stresses, the influences and personalities that

account for this individual not yet being a convinced Christian like ourselves. In other words we do not understand the 'ungodly'. As a result we judge them unfairly, look on them unkindly, blame them unmercifully, and fail to win them for Christ. We are in fact utterly unlike our Master, who reserved His chief onslaught for those who were 'godly', and stretched out the warm hand of understanding to the 'ungodly'.

Our evangelistic work does not suffer from a faulty presentation of the gospel or from lack of prayer preparation or individual zeal; it suffers from an inability to get non-Christians to attend. The lack of that mystic link of understanding and sympathy is serious, for without it non-Christians will not come to our meetings, or if they do, they will not be touched by the soundness of the message or the earnestness of the speaker. In these days when there is no alternative belief to the Christian faith, it is my personal conviction that many of our hearers *will* respond *if they are there to hear*, and if the message is presented by those who have done all they can to get alongside the non-Christian in imagination and feeling. We must not trust to the magic of a speaker's reputation, or the fascination of an unusual subject to draw in the crowds. It just does not work. They will come if and when they feel understood.

FRIENDSHIP

Where is it that we Christians are failing? Primarily in understanding, secondly in friendliness. The two are closely linked together. Understanding comes as we mix with those who are not Christian, as we begin to care for them not merely as souls to be saved, but as our neighbours whom our Lord has commanded us to love. We cannot, of course, begin to understand the modern pagan if we put ourselves in an ivory tower from the top of which the view is so different from that of the average man. Our Lord came down to earth: so must we. Our Lord was a friend of publicans and sinners: very, very few of us are. We find some of their habits different from ours, some of their thoughts possibly abhorrent, some of their words shocking. How can we be friends? Let us be clear that it is fantastic to talk glibly about winning people for Christ if we only do so at the end of a barge-pole. To fish for them we must study their nature and their ways, understand the whys and wherefores of their doings, and get as close to them as can be in a friendliness which springs from genuine care. This sincerity, this ring of true friendliness, almost always leads to willingness to listen and often to respond. The Scripture says 'There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Pr. xviii. 24, RSV). Ought we not to beseech God to make us genuinely friendly like that?

TOO WORLDLY?

There may be those who will suggest that 'the friendship of the world is enmity with God', and it is quite wrong to try to make friends with worldly people. If this is what James means, then Jesus Himself comes under that condemnation. For did He not pour out His love, sympathy and understanding on the much-married woman of Samaria, the despicable cheat, Zacchaeus, Mary of the streets, and Levi of the customs house? There is a real difference between the 'love of the world' and 'loving our neighbour'. When we are told not to be 'conformed to this world' we must also remember that God loved the world. But His love was in terms of persons, 'whosoever believeth'. Our love of the world is usually in terms of things or of ideas, or of habits. It is one of our most important Christian duties to resolve in our daily living the tension that arises be-

tween understanding and really caring for those in the world around us, and finding their manner of life often difficult to appreciate or share. By the grace of God it is possible to hold to our own principles and to draw our own line about these things without compromising our Christian faith or diminishing our influence with others. But we need to think our attitudes through, and be strong and determined as to why we adopt them.

LOVE, THE KEY

The easiest way out, of course, is to confine our friendships to a close Christian circle, and treat the souls to be won as fish to be angled for during missions or when specially famous speakers are within range, rather than all the time. The hardest and most Christian attitude is to extend the warmth of one's regard to all with whom we have contact of any kind, learning from them as well as about them, and sharing with them inevitably something of the vitality of our faith. We must have the insight to see that the drama of every individual's life is a real drama to them, acted often on a lonely stage. We may be able, under God, to alter its whole course. But to do this our hearts must be fired with love. We must really care for people and they must know it. We must, like our Master, love them as they are — each so different, each so unlike ourselves perhaps, yet each a person with the sacredness of an inner life not yet open to Christ, but none the less their own and meaning much to them. Only a genuine caring for them will open the way in. Do we care enough for people in this way?

It may help us to do so if we think of them as individuals rather than in the mass. We sometimes forget our Lord's arithmetic: the shepherd travelling over hill and dale for one lost sheep, the Father scanning the horizon for one dear son, the choirs of heaven rejoicing over one sinner repenting. We can hardly expect to get a deep understanding of a large number of people, though we learn a lot about them from the variety of our many daily contacts. If we concentrate upon the ones or twos whom we already know fairly well and are friendly with, praying God to give us sympathy and insight and genuine regard for them, we may well have the joy of seeing their spiritual curiosity increase, with the opportunity to help them coming sooner than we expected. Above all, we need to pray not for a better technique of evangelism, but for deeper love for our fellows.

(Editorial Note. A serious and pertinent criticism has been made in this article and we should be glad to have comments and suggestions as to ways in which we may 'reach the ungodly'.)

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