

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

It is attractive to argue in the current atmosphere of secular opinion in England that the more we reform and reorganize, the better we shall be, and that therefore, since reform is equated with efficiency, the more efficient we are in worldly and administrative terms, the more effective the Church will be as the instrument of God. This argument is nothing else than the traditional heresy of the English, Pelagianism, in modern dress. Those who read church history and who explore lovingly and carefully the traditions of the Church of England may still long for reform. They will still wonder whether what is advocated in the report is well grounded in Anglican spirituality and has taken account of it at all. They may well conclude that Martin Luther's advice has been disregarded: the baby has been let out with the bath water.

Social and Spiritual Factors in the Rural Parish

BY GEORGE CRATE

THE impact of modern society on the life of rural England varies both in its severity and effect. There are small hamlets where the situation, at least on the surface, differs little from that of a hundred years ago. Other villages are so urbanized as to be scarcely identifiable as agricultural communities at all. Many have been totally engulfed by the sprawling suburbs of towns, victims of the insatiable desire of town dwellers to escape from the nineteenth century clutter of dwellings. The main stream of rural life, however, shows certain trends which are more or less common to the whole. With these we are here concerned.

Most obvious of the influences towards change are the radical modifications which have taken, and still are taking place in agriculture itself. In spite of the "drift from the land", agriculture is still the largest single industry in terms of manpower employed. The farm worker lives in the midst of his "factory", and the wide deployment of the labour force can easily mislead as to its actual strength. A million workers and their families cannot be ignored either by Church or State. They have the same need for spiritual salvation and economic progress as everyone else.

Despite the reduced manpower, improvements in efficiency ensure that more food is produced now than ever before. English farmers are the most mechanized in the world (including the U.S.A.) in terms of machines per acre. New methods of breeding and rearing stock, improved varieties of crops, and mass produced fertilizers all contribute to this state of affairs. Agriculture now enjoys full support and recognition from the Government, the war and continued difficulties in balancing overseas trade having emphasized its vital importance to the

nation. The present progressive position is not entirely due to this, nor yet to the wisdom and foresight of those involved. To a considerable extent it has been necessitated by circumstances.

Even under modern conditions farm work is not an attractive form of employment; it is exacting work. There is no sanctuary from the weather, no "dirty" money, and at certain seasons, harvest and lambing for instance, the work must come before all other considerations. At such times there is no option about overtime! Except on a large farm with many workers, it is unusual to have more than one day off each week, and then often only with difficulty. Pay, in spite of increases (and the "perks") is still well below the national average. Frankly, there is better and easier money to be made in the towns. This is sufficient to make possible some form of personal transport (public transport being hopeless) so that moving house is not an immediate necessity, though it may become desirable later. Thus it is that, of fourteen council houses built for agricultural workers in one village, only two are now occupied by such. It is not uncommon to find that over fifty per cent of the working population of a village are employed elsewhere.

Faced with this "drift from the land", the farmer must increase his efficiency, whilst at the same time cutting his labour requirements. Even the labour which he still retains will inevitably become more costly. The isolation of the countryside has been broken. The farm worker knows what others have and wishes to aim for the same standard himself. He is less willing to accept a lower standard of living as a necessary corollary of agricultural work. His objective can be reached only by a more prosperous industry supporting a minimum labour force with a maximum of technological advance. Both farmers and farm workers are better off now than they were thirty years ago, but this trend will continue. The bigger the farm the greater the prosperity. Unfortunately the small man with under one hundred acres finds it increasingly difficult to compete. He has not the capital resources needed to provide machinery, and cannot buy in great bulk. Farming today is becoming big business.

With so many of the villagers working in other spheres the old social ties of a common interest in the land have ceased to have any effective strength. Indeed this is true even within a family. Very few school leavers consider work on the land, in many cases not even the sons of farmers. The work is too demanding of time and too restrictive of leisure pursuits. The fact that it is no longer a foregone conclusion that his son will follow in his footsteps, is a source of anxiety to a farmer who has spent his life building up his farm. Girls too are attracted to spheres where they find greater independence and more money than the traditional domestic work (good preparation for the farmer's wife) provided.

* * * *

Modern education has contributed to this state of affairs. Children no longer complete their entire education in the village school. This is reserved for primary education only. The school bus, an accepted feature of country life, introduces the child to a much wider world of

secondary education in towns up to ten miles away. Quite remarkable changes take place in children who have been attending their new school for even six months. Schools with rural pupils will include relevant instruction in the curriculum, but a much wider vision as to future prospects is given and opportunities afforded to qualify for them. In the matter of a career the inevitability of former generations has been replaced with much greater freedom of choice.

The diversity of occupations and interests and the ease with which the towns can be reached, is destroying the sense of belonging to a close knit unit of society bound together by common interest in, and dependence upon, the land. It may still be true that everyone knows everyone else, but knowing and caring are not the same thing. Each year sees a marked decline in the social activities of the village, especially noticeable among the younger folk. Even the older enthusiasts for such things are discouraged to the point of giving up completely. The sheet anchor of village social life—the whist drive—needs the lure of substantial prizes to keep it going. No doubt television has some bearing on this trend, but other factors also play a large part.

The boredom and frustration of country youth spring from this source. It is surprising how quickly they become bored with all but a few favoured programmes on television. Few have any inclination to read (a weakness in their education?) and most live in circumstances which discourage hobbies. Even the council houses, with their single living room, are not helpful. Youths wandering the villages at a loose end claim that they cannot pursue any hobby at home because the only room is being used as a television theatre. Outside the home there is often nothing, apart from mischief, for their entertainment. They do not seem to have the initiative to create constructive pursuits and cannot reach the town until able to own their own transport. Even the establishment which provides nothing more than tobacco, alcohol, and trivial chatter does not exist in every village, and is not open to school children in any case.

In a village there is very limited scope for friendships between the sexes. In the past this was acceptable because normal. The choice of friends, and in due course of life partners, was made from those available. This resulted in a degree of intermarriage which rendered the family relationships a considerable burden for the incumbent to master. Now the desire for a wider selection of friends and choice of life partner makes the limited selection available in the village a matter of frustration, and leads to a general exodus to the nearest town on Saturday nights. Experience would seem to suggest that there is a greater proportion of weddings which take place due to pregnancy in the country. If so, this is partly due to the frustration of which we have spoken, but also to the farmer's tradition of ensuring that he will have offspring to work on, and eventually take over, his farm. This ancient concern has less relevance today, but old habits die hard and it is still an accepted practice to ensure the fertility of a marriage before final commitment, and so to regard the consequences of premarital relationships less critically than in some other sections of society.

Frustration does not belong only to the young. Their parents,

having bettered themselves financially by finding employment in a town, naturally wish to move nearer their work and to enjoy the superior amenities to be found there. It is a fallacy to believe that working men prefer living in the country when their work is in the town. Apart from a few who have an interest in rural life or nature itself, the amenities of the town are so glaringly superior that the tendency is to move there when opportunity occurs. Here long waiting lists for council houses or the need for raising capital are the frustrating factor. The villages face this problem with considerable anxiety since they can see no future for themselves as communities unless this trend is halted and even reversed.

The farm worker is one of those who lives in the country because of his work. It is also true that he must have an affinity with the natural order, otherwise he would never continue in the work. This does not save him from frustration, however. He often lives in a tied cottage which is inferior to those in towns. His pay is also inferior; his neighbour, working shifts in a centrally heated plant, may bring home twice as much in wages. The farm worker cannot provide the same equipment for his home and family. If the modern symbol of prosperity is the ownership of a car, then these figures may prove interesting. Of forty cars in one village only one is owned by a farm worker—and his wife goes out to work full time. Of the rest, eleven are owned by farmers themselves and the remaining twenty-eight by others. This reflects upon the small number of farm workers and also their ability to run a car. In fairness it must be pointed out that someone working in the town will make a vehicle a high priority in order to facilitate travel. The fact remains, however, that of the *employed* population (male) about 65 per cent of non-agricultural workers have a vehicle, whereas only 15 per cent of farm workers possess one. Satisfaction from the actual work by virtue of its nature can be the only barrier against frustration and discontent in such circumstances.

Another factor which has a considerable bearing on village life today is the change in the position of the "big houses". At one time the village was a part of the estate attached to the Hall, Grange, or Manor. Farmers were their tenants and the villages were originally created to house the domestic and other staff of the estate. All were dependent in some way upon the Squire or Lord of the Manor for their living. In these circumstances it was not surprising that he dictated indirectly, if not directly, the manner of life of the whole village. As in feudal times the serf must obey, so in more recent times discretion demanded conformity with the known desires of the gentry.

In many cases the patronage of the village church was also in the hands of the squire, whose forefathers may well have built the place. The rector was appointed by him and, though protected by his freehold, the incumbent's position could be made intolerable if he incurred the displeasure of his patron. The attendance of all employees and tenants was expected, if not demanded, on Sundays. In spite of the full congregation which this guaranteed, these were poor conditions under which to minister the Gospel of the liberty of the sons of God. An unwilling listener is indeed stony ground, and a patronized pulpit a somewhat shaky platform from which to proclaim the Word. Un-

fortunately, but somewhat naturally, the Church was identified with the ruling classes and appeared to be their spiritual taskmaster. The situation was aptly summed up in a verse from a well-known children's hymn :

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.

Happily, this verse is now omitted, but it is small wonder that, released from their dependence upon the gentry, the village folk should feel that they were also emancipated from the spiritual doctrine and discipline of the Church. Perhaps this provides one reason for the failure of the Church of England in the Industrial Revolution—it was a compromised institution. The unorthodoxy of John Wesley and the freedom of Methodism (which sprang from this great Anglican) from this handicap provided comparative success at that time.

Not all the large estates have vanished, not all the large houses are turned into schools or institutions, but in those cases where they remain their power is greatly reduced since the village community is no longer dependent upon them. Indeed they often have difficulty in staffing since they are in fierce competition for the labour available.

* * * *

We must now consider the effects of these social changes upon the Church and seek the lines along which a solution may be found.

Beginning where we are, with the effect of the dissolution of the large estates and their power, we find two main effects. Firstly, on the part of the gentry themselves, a falling away in attendance at church and a slackening of interest reflected in declining financial support. There are outstanding exceptions to this which only emphasize the general rule. In most cases the patronage has been made over to a society. In the past every financial need was met from this source, now the Church is regarded as one of many charities to be supported—a charity for the maintenance of ancient and historic buildings. In face of this it would be interesting to discover the real interest formerly held in the Church by the gentry. It is tempting to come to the obvious conclusion.

Secondly, the effect upon the villagers has been that of declining attendance. The Church as a spiritual body has little relevance to them. It is not only the younger generation who are absent, but also the vast majority (with notable exceptions again) of those older folk who were brought up under the old régime. The full pews of yester year are now revealed for what they were—rows of regimented dependents—and their value called in question. The small contemporary congregations are at least genuine. Probably the present generation is no less faithful than their predecessors, for the full pews were no indication of the spiritual condition of society.

The contemporary minister in a country parish must overcome this handicapping legacy of the past. He must seek to make it abundantly clear that neither he, nor the Church, are in any way associated with the " Establishment ", still less to be identified with it. The younger

country parson may find it embarrassing to be called "sir" by those old enough to be his grandparents, but it is the natural thing for those who have been used to deferring to the sons of the gentry in this way. Life and teaching must convey to all that the ministry of the Church is the ministry of the Gospel of God's love to all men. There must be no element of condescension, favour, or differentiation in the dealings of the minister.

Most country incumbents have the burden of the maintenance of two, three, or four churches to cope with. It would be easy, and it is tempting, to approach those who can most obviously afford to help—the local gentry. This would be fatal to his efforts to reach the other folk—he would be under moral patronage of the most insidious kind and therefore compromised in their sight. Donations can only be happily accepted from all on the same basis, an offering in response to a need which has been made generally known, the only difference being in the sum involved and not the circumstances of the giving. We have already noted the falling off in financial support from the wealthy. Whilst this may be beneficial from a spiritual point of view it does emphasize the financial drag which the church buildings represent. Again, the past casts its shadow, for the congregation have not yet realized that their responsibility for this increases as their former patrons withdraw. Even the most devout Christians have no sense of the true spiritual meaning of stewardship and are so imbued with the idea that the Church has no need of their money, that their contributions are very small—mere tokens. A spiritual awakening is the only real answer to the crumbling churches of rural England.

In this matter the time must come when common sense overcomes sentiment, and this will require the closure of many country churches. The countryman (Christian or not) is closely attached to his church building, however, and years of patient education will be needed from the highest levels down. The sooner it is begun the better. Even looked at from the point of view of the overseas mission and relief work of the Church, the money spent on a multitude of churches, each providing for less than a handful of worshippers, must eventually assume the proportions of a scandal. Sentimental attachments must eventually be broken if the Church is to remain relevant to the age. Closures may amount to 50 per cent or even 75 per cent of churches in villages and hamlets. It might be better to demolish them rather than allow them to fall into decay. This may sound ruthless, but no one can justify the expenditure of money given to the work of God on the upkeep of redundant churches. (Particularly fine examples, really worthy from an architectural or historic point of view, could be restored and maintained in a proper manner.) The living, forward-looking nature of the Church demands that these millstones of the past be cast off. In selecting the churches to be retained as the parish churches of the future, practical issues must prevail over sentiment. In a new parish comprising five to ten villages (according to population and area) many could come in their own cars. For others a parish minibus could be run for a fraction of the amount of the upkeep of the abandoned churches. The sale of church property would provide funds for the provision of suitable accommodation for Sunday

schools and church functions, a new and carefully planned house for the incumbent, a stipend in accordance with his responsibilities and expenses, and help for the town clergy who have no endowed income. Modifications in the legal position would be required, adjustments of sentiments and habits would be needed, but surely the situation in the Church at the present time cries out for it. It is useless to deplore the bad deployment of the clergy unless far reaching measures are contemplated. The new pattern in the English countryside would be more akin to that which pertains in similar areas in Canada or Australia, except that the distances involved would be considerably smaller.

* * * *

This matter must be seen in relation to the evangelistic task of the Church, in a world where the Gospel is not keeping pace with the growing population, and leads one naturally to mention the lack of support for missions in large areas of the countryside. Rural folk are parochial in the extreme. Their interest in the Church and financial support for it seldom go beyond the repair of the spire or the renovation of the organ. They are hardly to blame, since much of the incumbent's time and energy is expended in appeals for such things. The new-type parish would bring release from this hopeless situation. Perhaps there would be time and opportunity to lead the faithful into an experience of belonging to a universal fellowship of believers which is engaged in a life and death struggle for the souls of men everywhere. It cannot be presumed that even the most faithful churchgoer has any real understanding of the vital nature of faith in Christ for the eternal destiny of the soul, or of the reality of the Church as a militant body locked in battle with the Evil One. The fact that the countryside is coming out of its former extreme isolation can assist in this particular aspect of the teaching.

It is probably true that the countryman is more religious than his industrial counterpart. This "religion" is hardly a help to the Christian minister, however, since there is seldom anything specifically Christian in it. It often seems only slightly removed from superstition. No doubt agriculture draws attention to the fact that a Hand other than their own is at work. There persists a feeling that the Church represented by the building, has some place in the general religious scheme of things. Many who never come to church, except at harvest time, would be more upset to see the church closed or demolished than the few Christian believers would. To them the church building is a talisman of the Deity's interest in, and support for, their life and work. Hence their ritual attendance at Harvest Festival, the point at which the Christian faith and their own brand of religion cross paths.

To be ranked among the most difficult tasks of the country clergy is that of clarifying the Gospel to those who have long been steeped in this kind of nebulous religious superstition. It is desperately easy to compromise and become satisfied with a man's "religious outlook" as a substitute for Christian faith. In time the Christian minister's own theological convictions and assurance of faith could waver in the face of this fixed and apparently immovable obstacle. If "all life is a

gamble " is repeated often enough, even the most convinced Christian may begin to wonder whether it may not be true after all. The faith of the minister must be no less firm than the countryman's convictions on such matters. Otherwise he will lapse into latitudinarianism, syncretism, or plain Pelagianism. The opportunity provided by the Harvest Festival, in these circumstances, must be used to the full. A common basis of interest can be used as the foundation of Christian doctrine. There may be no other opportunity unless a family birth, marriage, or death brings about another meeting of the ways.

The friendliness of all must not deceive the incumbent. It does not mean that the people accept all that he stands for, either as to doctrine or morals. It is just an accepted feature of country life. At least it makes breaking the ice easier and can in time (patience is certainly a necessary virtue here) be used to show the minister's concern for them in life and its problems, and death, and its fears. Above all, it may provide an opportunity to speak of Christ as Saviour and God. Few have any conception of the awfulness of sin and their need of a Saviour. To most, "Christianity" means living within the accepted social conventions and being mildly religious. Here lies the heart of the problem. The Gospel is immeasurably more than an annual remembrance of "the Hand that feeds and waters".

The breakdown in community spirit presents the Church with an opportunity to project itself as the new community in Christ. This, of course, will not be easily understood, and it would be easy to rush in with a round of social activities which would please many. The Church however, has no meaning without the experience of redemption in Christ. To bring new members into the new community means to bring them to Christ. All that is done must be seen and known to be done in the name of Him who was crucified, is risen, and will return. Otherwise we are dishonouring Him, for the creation of Christian fellowship is the work of God through the Spirit by virtue of the work of Christ. The social activities of men will become involved in, and influenced by, this fellowship, but they cannot create it. We must be sure that the attraction of the new community is Christ, and not any man-made gimmick. Whether the meeting is a youth club, a Bible study, a children's evening, or a church service, it must be abundantly clear that Christ is the reason and the foundation, the means and the end, the be all and end all of everything in the life and ministry of the Church. Anything less will not do. Who are we to cheapen, in order to court popularity, the Gospel which cost so much? We must disabuse those who, with some justification from past experience, believe that the Church has nothing different to say from any secular body, and cannot see in it anything resembling a new community, the creation of God.

There are signs that, beneath the surface appearance of indifference or even antipathy, the youth of our villages are looking for something to replace the sense of security which the inevitability of the past gave them. For instance, amid the welter of conflicting moral opinions to which they are subject by modern writing, broadcasting, and entertainment, some are grateful for a clear and firm line of guidance. Whilst outwardly they have been willing to accommodate their standards to

the society about them, when it comes to the point they are not sure and, being lost, they are afraid. An example is the gratitude with which they greet the fact that someone still believes in the Christian view of sex and is willing to say so without compromise, and that it is not inevitable that the issue will become, for them, a matter of animal instinct. They are grateful to know that there are some who still believe it to be God's highest gift to mankind, and who look upon chastity before marriage as not only worthwhile but also vitally important to the full enjoyment of married life. They are not all keen to know—it may take time to get through to many of them, but it provides the Church with an opportunity to show that it has something definite and vital to say concerning a matter of great relevance to them. Many have the impression that what the Church has to say is none of these things. It is popular in secular circles today to claim that being indefinite, posing problems without answering them, and criticizing "narrow-mindedness" is being relevant. The Church must show the fallacy of this by proclaiming the truth of the Word of God. This will not always please and will often run counter to all that contemporary society holds dear, but when the Church speaks unequivocally upon the basis of the Word of God people of sincerity will listen and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will respond thankfully.

When all else has been said, it is still true that a higher proportion of country folk attend a place of worship on Sunday than is the case in the towns. It is not unusual to have ten per cent of the population attending—not taking into account the chapel attendances, which would raise this figure to, say, fifteen per cent. The corresponding figures in the towns cannot approach this. It is easy for the country parson to be discouraged by the sheer smallness of numbers, but if he thinks in terms of percentage then he has grounds for encouragement, though not satisfaction. One of the greatest shocks which he faces is to view a congregation from which just one regular family is absent. The appearance of decimation must be experienced to be understood.

Though on a small scale, there are opportunities for the teaching of the Gospel and the responsibilities as well as the privileges of the Christian life. There is encouraging evidence that a proportion of church people will respond gladly to a Bible ministry as this satisfies a long felt spiritual hunger and thirst. It is wonderful to behold the radiant response which they make to the Bible's teaching concerning redemption, salvation, assurance, forgiveness, discipleship, and other great evangelical themes of revelation. It is surprising how many will read the Word of God regularly when introduced to the Scripture Union, and do so with real enthusiasm. With this comes also a new awakening to their place in a world-wide Church which needs their fellowship, and whose fellowship they need in their turn, and a new understanding of their own personal evangelistic responsibilities.

Discouragement, encouragement. In this experience the country minister is no different from any of his brethren. Many of his problems are the same, many others different. As always the opportunities are there, God-given. The demands are great and well may he ask, "Who is sufficient for these things?" "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."