

THE DEVIL'S MISSION OF AMUSEMENT

THE CHURCH'S TASK – ENTERTAINMENT OR EVANGELIZATION?

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Different days demand their own special testimony. The watchman who would be faithful to his Lord and the city of his God has need to carefully note the signs of the times and emphasize his witness accordingly. Concerning the testimony needed now, there can be little, if any, doubt. An evil is in the professed camp of the Lord, so gross, so brazen in its impudence, that the most shortsighted of spiritual men can hardly fail to notice it. During the past few years it has developed at an abnormal rate, ever for evil. It has worked like leaven until now the whole lump ferments. Look which way you may, its presence makes itself manifest. There is little if anything to choose between Church, Chapel, or Mission Hall. However they may differ in some respects, they bear a striking likeness in the posters that figure upon and disfigure their notice boards. Amusement for the people is the leading article advertised by each. If any of my readers doubt my statement, or think my utterance too sweeping, let them take a tour of inspection and study "the announcements for the week" at the doors of the sanctuaries of the neighbourhood; or let them read the religious advertisements in their local papers. I have done this again and again, until the hideous fact has been proved up to the hilt, that "amusement" is ousting "the preaching of the gospel" as the great attraction. "Concerts," "Entertainments," "Fancy Fairs," "Smoking Conferences," "Dramatic Performances," are the words honoured with biggest type and most startling colours. The Concert is fast becoming as much a recognized part of church life as the Prayer Meeting, and is already, in most places, far better attended.

"Providing recreation for the people" will soon be looked upon as a necessary part of Christian work and as binding upon the Church of God, as though it were a Divine command, unless some strong voice be raised which will make themselves heard. I do not presume to possess such a voice, but I do entertain the hope that I may awaken some louder echoes. Anyway, the burden of the Lord is upon me in this matter, and I leave it with him to give my testimony ringing tone, or to let it die away in silence. I shall have delivered my soul in either case. Yet the conviction fills my mind that in all parts of the country there are faithful men and women who see the danger and deplore it and will endorse my witness and my warning.

It is only during the past few years that "amusement" has become a recognized weapon of our warfare and developed into a mission. There has been a steady "down grade" in this respect. From "speaking out," as the Puritans did, the Church has gradually toned down her testimony, then winked at and excused the frivolities of the day. Then she has tolerated them in her borders, and now she has adopted them and provided a home for them under the plea of "reaching the masses and getting the ear of the people." The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the Church of Christ that part of her mission is to provide entertainment for the people with a view to winning them into her ranks. The human nature that lies in every heart has risen to the bait. Here, now, is an opportunity of gratifying the flesh and yet retaining a comfortable conscience. We can now please ourselves in order to

do good to others. The rough old cross can be exchanged for a “costume,” and the exchange can be made with the benevolent purpose of elevating the people.

All this is terribly sad, and the more so because truly gracious souls are being led away by the specious pretext that it is a form of Christian work. They forget that a seemingly beautiful angel may be the devil himself, “for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14).

I. Not Supported By Scripture

My first contention is that providing amusement for the people is nowhere spoken of in Holy Scripture as one of the functions of the church. What her duties are will come under our notice later on. At present it is the negative side of the question that we are dealing with. Now, surely, if our Lord had intended his Church to be the caterer of entertainment, and so counteract the god of this world, he would hardly have left so important a branch of service unmentioned. If it is Christian work, why did not Christ at least hint it? “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,” is clear enough. So would it have been if he had added, “and provide amusement for those who do not relish the Gospel.” No such addendum, however, is to be found, nor even an equivalent for such, in any one of our Lord’s utterances. This style of work did not seem to occur to his mind. Then again, Christ, as an ascended Lord, gives to his Church specially qualified men for the carrying on of his work, but no mention of any gift for this branch of service occurs in the list. “He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers – for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” Where do the “public entertainers” come in? The Holy Ghost is silent concerning them, and his silence is eloquence.

If “providing recreation” be a part of the Church’s work, surely we may look for some promise to encourage her in the toilsome task. Where is it? There is a promise for “my Word”; it “shall not return unto me void.” There is the heart-rejoicing declaration concerning the Gospel: “it is the power of God.” There is the sweet assurance for the preacher of Christ that, whether he be successful or not as the world judges success – he is “sweet savour unto God.” There is the glorious benediction for those whose testimony, so far from amusing the world, rouses its wrath: “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” Were the prophets persecuted because they amused the people, or because they refused to? The Gospel of amusement has no martyrology. In vain does one look for a promise from God for providing recreation for a godless world. That which has no authority from Christ, no provision made for it by the Spirit, no promise attached to it by God, can only be a lying hypocrite when it lays claim to be “a branch of the work of the Lord.”

II. Not Taught By The Saviour

But again, providing amusement for the people is in direct antagonism to the teaching and life of Christ and all his apostles. What is to be the attitude of the Church towards the world according to our Lord’s teaching? Strict separation and uncompromising hostility.

While no hint ever passed his lips of winning the world by pleasing it, or accommodating methods to its taste, his demand for unworldliness was constant and emphatic. He sets forth in one short sentence what he would have his disciples to be: "Ye are the salt of the earth." Yes, the salt: not the sugar-candy nor a "lump of delight." Something the world will be more inclined to spit out than swallow with a smile. Something more calculated to bring water to the eye than laughter to the lip.

Short and sharp is the utterance, "Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God." "If ye were of the world, the world would live his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." "In the world ye shall have tribulation but be of good cheer; for I have overcome the world." "I have given them thy Word, and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

"My kingdom is not of this world." These passages are hard to reconcile with the modern idea of the Church providing recreation for those who have no taste for more serious things – in other words, of conciliating the world. If they teach anything at all, it is that fidelity to Christ will bring down the world's wrath, and that Christ intended His disciples to share with Him the world's scorn and rejection. How did Jesus act? What were the methods of the only perfectly "faithful witness" the Father has ever had?

As none will question that he is to be the worker's model, let us gaze upon him. How significant the introductory account given by Mark, "Now, after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the Gospel." And again, in the same chapter, I find him saying, in answer to the announcement of his disciples that all men were seeking for him, "Let us go into the next towns that I may preach there also, for therefore came I forth. Matthew tells us, "And it came to pass when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and preach in their cities." In answer to John's question, "Art thou he that should come?" He replies, "Go and show John those things which ye do hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." There is no item in the catalogue after this sort: "And the careless are amazed, and the perishing are provided with innocent recreation."

We are not left in doubt as to the matter of his preaching, for "when many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door, he preached the Word unto them." There was no change of method adopted by the Lord during his course of ministry; no learning by experience of a better plan. His first word of command to his evangelists was, "As ye go, preach." His last, "Preach the Gospel to every creature." Not an evangelist suggests that at any time during his ministry he turned aside from preaching to entertain, and so attract the people. He was in awful earnestness, and his ministry was like himself. Had he been less uncompromising, and introduced more of the "bright and pleasant" element into his mission, he would have been more popular.

Yet, when many of his disciples went back, because of the searching nature of his preaching, I do not find there was any attempt to increase a diminished congregation by

resorting to something more pleasant to the flesh. I do not hear him saying, “We must keep up the gatherings anyway: so run after those friends, Peter, and tell them we will have a different style of service tomorrow. Something very short and attractive, with little, if any, preaching. Today was a service for God, but tomorrow we will have a pleasant evening for the people. Tell them they will be sure to enjoy it, and have a happy hour. Be quick, Peter; we must get the public somehow, – if not by Gospel, then by nonsense.” No, this was not how he argued. Gazing in sorrow on those who would not hear the Word, he simply turns to the twelve, and asks, “Will ye also go away?”

Jesus pitied sinners, pleaded with them, sighed over them, warned them, and wept over them; but never sought to amuse them. When the evening shadows of his consecrated life were deepening into the night of death, he reviewed his holy ministry, and found comfort and sweet solace in the thought, “I have given them thy Word.” As with the Master, so with his apostles – their teaching is the echo of his. In vain will the epistles be searched to discover any trace of a gospel of amusement. The same call for separation from the world rings in everyone, “But not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed,” is the word of command in the Romans. “Come out from among them. and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing.” It is the trumpet call in the Corinthians. In other words it is come out – keep out – keep clean out – for “what communion hath light with darkness, and what concord hath Christ with Belial?”

“God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world.” Here is the true relationship between the Church and the world according to the Epistle to the Galatians. “Be not ye, therefore, partakers with them. Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them,” is the attitude enjoined in Ephesians. “Sons of God without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world: holding forth the Word of life,” is the word in Philipppians. “Dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world,” says the Epistle to the Colossians. “Abstain from all appearance of evil” is the demand in Thessalonians.

“If a man, therefore, purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master’s use,” is the word to Timothy. “Let us go forth, therefore, unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach,” is the heroic summons of the Hebrews. James, with holy severity, declares that “The friendship of the world is enmity with God; whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” Peter writes: “Not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance; but as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.” John writes a whole epistle, the gist of which is, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

Here are the teachings of the apostles concerning the relationship of the Church and the world. And yet, in the face of them, what do we see and hear? A friendly compromise

between the two, and an insane effort to work in partnership for the good of the people. God help us, and dispel the strong delusion. How did the apostles carry on their mission work? Was it in harmony with their teaching?

Let the Acts of the Apostles give the answer.

Anything approaching the worldly fooling of to-day is conspicuous by its absence. The early evangelists had boundless confidence in the power of the Gospel, and employed no other weapon. Pentecost followed plain preaching. When Peter and John had been locked up for the night for preaching the resurrection, the early Church had a prayer meeting. Directly they returned, and the petition offered for the two was, "And now, Lord, grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word." They had no thought of praying, "Grant unto thy servants more policy, that by a wise and discriminating use of innocent recreation they may avoid the offence of the cross, and sweetly show this people how happy and merry a lot we are."

The charge brought against the apostles by the members of the Council was, "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine." Not much chance of this charge being brought against modern methods. The description of their work is, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." Then, it they "ceased not" from this, they had no time for arranging for entertainments: they gave themselves continually to the ministry of the word. Scattered by persecution, the early disciples "went everywhere preaching the word."

When Philip went to Samaria, and was the means of bringing "great joy in that city," the only recorded method is, "he preached Christ unto them." When the apostles went to visit the scene of his labours it is stated, "and they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the Gospel in many villages of the Samaritans." As they went back to Jerusalem directly they had finished their preaching, it is evident they did not think in their mission to stay and organize some "pleasant evenings" for the people who did not believe.

The congregations in those days did not expect anything but the word of the Lord, for Cornelius says to Peter, "We all are here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." The message given was, "Words whereby thou and all thine house shall be saved." Cause and effect are closely linked in the statement, "Men of Cyrene spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus; and the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed, and turned to the Lord." Here you have their method – they preached. Their matter – the Lord Jesus. Their power – the hand of the Lord was with them. Their success – many believed.

What more does the Church of God require to-day? When Paul and Barnabas worked together, the record is, "the Lord gave testimony unto the word of his grace." When Paul, in a vision, hears a man of Macedonia saying, "Come over and help us," he assuredly gathers that the Lord had called him to preach the Gospel unto them. Why so? How did he know but that the help needed was the brightening of their lives by a little amusement, or the refining of their manners by a collection of paintings? He never thought of such things. "Come and help

us!” meant to him, “Preach the Gospel.” “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and reasoned with them out of the Scriptures” – not “about” the scriptures, mark, but “out” of them – “opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered and rise from the dead.” That was the “manner” of evangelistic work in those days, and it seems to have been wonderfully powerful; for the verdict of the people is, “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.” Just now the world is turning the Church upside down; that is the only difference.

When God told Paul that he had much people in Corinth, I read, “And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the Word of God among them.” Evidently then, he judged that the only way to bring them was by the Word. A year and a half, and only one method adopted. Wonderful! We should have had a dozen in that time! But then Paul never reckoned that providing something pleasant for the ungodly was part of his ministry; for, on his way to Jerusalem and martyrdom, he says, “Neither count my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God.” This was all the ministry he knew. The last description we have of the methods of this prince of evangelists is of a piece with all that has gone before, “He expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets, from morning til evening, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus.” What a contrast to all the rot and nonsense now being perpetrated in the holy name of Christ! The Lord clear the Church of all the rubbish that the devil has imposed upon her, and bring us back again to apostolic methods!

III. Not Spiritually Fruitful

Lastly, the mission of amusement utterly fails to effect the desired end among the unsaved; but it works havoc among the young converts. Were it a success, it would be none the less wrong. Success belongs to God. Faithfulness to his instructions belongs to me. But it is not. “Test it even by this,” and it is a contemptible failure. Let that be the method which is answered by fire, and the verdict will be, “The preaching of the Word, that is the power.” Let us see the converts who have been first won by amusement. Let the harlots and the drunkards to whom a dramatic entertainment has been God’s first link in the chain of their conversion stand forth. Let the careless and the scoffers who have cause to thank God that the Church has relaxed her spirit of separation and met them half-way in their worldliness, speak and testify. Let the husbands, wives, and children, who rejoice in a new and holy home through “Sunday Evening Lectures on Social Questions” tell out their joy. Let the weary, heavy-laden souls who have found peace through a concert, no longer keep silence. Let the men and women who have found Christ through the reversal of apostolic methods declare the same, and show the greatness of Paul’s blunder when he said, “I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” There is neither voice nor any to answer. The failure is on a par with the folly, and as huge as the sin. Out of thousands with whom I have personally conversed, the mission of amusement has claimed no convert.

Now let the appeal be made to those who, repudiating every other method, have staked everything on the Book and the Holy Ghost. Let them be challenged to produce

results. There is no need. Blazing sacrifices on every hand attest the answer by fire. Ten thousand times ten thousand voices are ready to declare that the plain preaching of the Word was, first and last, the cause of their salvation. But how about the other side of this matter – what are baneful effects? Are they also nil? I will here solemnly as before the Lord, give my personal testimony. Though I have never seen a sinner saved, I have seen any number of backsliders manufactured by this new departure. Over and over again have young Christians, and sometimes Christians who are not young, come to me in tears, and asked what they were to do, as they had lost all their peace and fallen into evil. Over and over again has the confession been made, “I began to go wrong by attending worldly amusements that Christians patronized.” It is not very long since that a young man, in an agony of soul, said to me, “I never thought of going to the theatre until my minister put it into my heart by preaching that there was no harm in it. I went, and it has led me from bad to worse and now I am a miserable backslider; and he is responsible for it.”

When young converts begin to “damp off,” forsake the gatherings for prayer, and grow worldly, I almost always find that worldly Christianity is responsible for the first downward step. The mission of amusements is the devil’s half-way house to the world. It is because of what I have seen that I feel deeply, and would fain write strongly. This thing is working rottenness in the Church of God, and blasting her service for the King. In the guise of Christianity, it is accomplishing the devil’s own work. Under the pretence of going out to reach the world, it is carrying our sons and daughters into the world. With the plea of “Do not alienate the masses with your strictness,” it is seducing the young disciples from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ. Professing to win the world, it is turning the garden of the Lord into a public recreation ground, To fill the temple with those who see no beauty in Christ, a grinning Dagon is put over the doorway.

It will be no wonder if the Holy Ghost, grieved and insulted, withdraws his presence; for “what concord hath Christ with Belial, and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?”

“Come out!” is the call for today. Sanctify yourselves. Put away the evil from among you. Cast down the world’s altars and cut down her groves. Spurn her offered assistance. Decline her help, as your Master did the testimony of devils, for “he suffered them not to speak, because they knew him.” Renounce all the policy of the age. Trample upon Saul’s armour. Grasp the Book of God. Trust the Spirit who wrote its pages. Fight with this weapon only and always. Cease to amuse and seek to arouse. Shun the clap of a delighted audience, and listen for the sobs of a convicted one. Give up trying to “please” men who have only the thickness of the ribs between their souls and hell; and warn, and plead, and intreat, as those who feel the waters of eternity creeping upon them.

Let the Church again confront the world; testify against it; meet it only behind the cross; and, like her Lord, she shall overcome, and with him share the victory.