

THE IMPORTANCE OF ALTAR WORK

By Rev. H. C. Morrison, D. D.

The average altar worker has had little or no instruction in the difficult, delicate, and all-important service in which they are engaged. It is so easy to mislead an earnest seeker, to hurt and hinder the soul, instead of helping it; it would be well if altar workers, those who point the penitent sinner to Christ for pardon, or lead the hungry and thirsting Christian into the Canaan experience, could be thoroughly trained.

We see and hear much about the altar during revival meetings that seems to us utterly improper and hurtful, that we feel constrained to offer a few suggestions. We are frequently reminded of an old physician we heard of in a certain community who had but one remedy, and whatever the symptoms of his patient might be, he paid little or no attention to diagnosis, but always, and everywhere, gave calomel. Some altar workers appear to treat every case exactly alike, and no case with thoughtful intelligence.

One would naturally think that the altar worker should approach a seeker quietly, in the most courteous and kindly manner. The wise physician always approaches his patient in that way. To win the confidence of the seeker, to make the penitent feel that you have a genuine interest in his or soul, that your own heart is mellow with tender sympathy and love of Christ, is to get a good start with the one to be instructed; and it is to be remembered that even a penitent at the altar is an intelligent being with his faculties and sensibilities wide-awake and sensitive to impressions, good or bad.

In order to treat the case we should know something of it. Why not quietly ask, "Friend, are you seeking to be converted, reclaimed, or sanctified? Are you a penitent sinner, or a child of God troubled with doubt?" We are not suggesting that all of these questions be asked, but that sufficient questions be asked to find out the condition of the seeker. That will prepare one to search for the difficulty, to quote appropriate Scripture, to put in the sword and search for the difficulties, or to bind up the wound, as the need may be. It is a real help to get the seeker to talk to the instructor, to break the spell of dumbness that sometimes seems to chain the seeker. Get into a quiet conversation, and draw from the penitent heart the difficulty standing in the way.

Sometimes there is hatred against someone; there is a fear of being called to preach; there is an unwillingness to become a missionary; there is a hidden sin in the past life. It is a great help to a seeker to get him or her to talk with you freely of that thing which hinders progress or locks the door of their heart against the gentle rappings of the Saviour. It would seem the instructor at the altar should be full of kindness, patience, the love of Christ, and a genuine love for souls. When the instructor gets out of harmony with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit he can

but be a great hindrance to the penitent seeking the Lord.

The altar worker must recognize the different stages of the seeker. The thoughtful, meditative attitude, looking over one's life and reckoning up the cost. The stage of earnest prayer; the time of crying out for human help and guidance. The time when the soul turns from human help and reaches out for the Lord alone. He should be able to adapt instruction and sympathy to the seeker in the stage through which he may be passing. It is certainly as important to be intelligent and practical as an instructor at the altar, guiding a soul to the Saviour, as it is for a teacher in school assisting a student in solving a problem, or a physician at the bedside helping a patient back to health.

Not a few of our altar workers seem to think that the main thing is noise. They will rush at a penitent and begin to hollow at them in a tone more appropriate for a mule driver whipping his team up a muddy hill, and demanding of the seeker, "Believe! believe! believe!" "Why don't you trust God, if you want to get saved?" "Take it by faith! Take it by faith! Take it by faith!" "Put up your hands. Throw up your face, and pray with all your might. O, if you are not going to pray, there is no use coming to the altar." And thus they will scold and talk with harshness and severity to a penitent, without any sort of intelligent and kindly inquiry into the state of mind, or the difficulties with which the poor soul is struggling.

We fully appreciate the fact that the time comes when the seeker needs to be urged to trust; that it is a good thing for the seekers to break away from their timidity, lift up hands and face to the Lord, and pray aloud and earnestly for salvation. But it is hurtful to raise a quarrel with the seeker about this sort of exercise when he is not ready for it. In other words, we must not beat green apples off the tree. It is a poor horticulturist who cannot tell ripe apples from green ones. It is a poor altar worker who has no spiritual discernment, that will judge with a good degree of accuracy, the state and stages of the seeker. It is easily possible to confuse, worry, and discourage a penitent at the altar.

There is nothing better for the seeking penitent than a few kindly and sympathetic words that will draw out a statement of his condition, of what he is seeking, of the special difficulties in his way, of a confession of his sins, of his purpose, and of his faith, as far as it goes. Something like the following: "You have fully determined to forsake your sins. Your mind is made up to seek salvation until you obtain it. You believe, with all your heart, that the Lord Jesus Christ is both willing and able to save. You desire, above all things else, to be saved, and become a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus." When the seeker has answered all these questions in the affirmative, you are well on the way with him to the "Father's house." Perhaps he will say, "I have been so great a sinner that I have little, or no hope for mercy." This is a good sign. The conviction is deep and genuine. Your answer is, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as

snow." He answers, "But I have delayed so long." Your answer is, "Jesus says, 'Who-soever cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out.'" He begs, in tears and trembling, "How shall I pray?" Your answer, "God be merciful to me a sinner." "Lord, save, or I perish." "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief."

There is little probability that the altar worker will quote too much scripture to a penitent. "We are saved by faith," but we must have something offered us to have faith in. It is one thing to cry into the seeker's ear, "Believe! believe! believe!" and it is another thing to give the seeker some appropriate promise of the Word of God to believe. An appropriate Scripture quoted to the earnest seeker is like throwing a life preserver to a poor fellow struggling without help, with the whelming waves of the sea. The Word of God is quick and powerful. Jesus says, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." The Word of God is the sword with which the Spirit kills sin, and the light with which the Spirit guides the wanderer home, the medicine with which the Spirit heals the broken-hearted. In altar work let us be faithful, and wise in the use of the Word of God.—Pentecostal Herald.

MISSION FINANCES.

To pledge or not to pledge! That is the question.
Whether 'tis noble in a man to take
The gospel free, and another man foot the bill,
Or sign a pledge and pay toward the church expenses!
To give, to pay—aye, there's the rub—to pay!
When on the free pew plan a man may have
A sitting free and take the gospel, too,
As though he paid, and none be aught the wiser
Save the Vestry Committee, who—
Most honorable men—can keep a secret.
To err is human; human, too, to buy
At cheapest rate. I'll take the gospel so;
For others do the same—a common rule.
I'm wise; I'll wait, not work; I'll pray, not pay,
And let the other fellow foot the bills.
And so with me the gospel's free, you see!"
—Rev. J. D. McMillan in Men and Missions.

INFLUENCE OF PASTORS.

The Laymen's Bulletin says:
I have frequently said that we could follow the leadership of the clergymen by the way the gifts to missions in various congregations rose and fell, but had no facts to prove this, and I have just looked up a few records to illustrate it in a small way. In one place six men followed each other through twelve years. The church had given \$104.00; a new man came, and they dropped to \$78.00. Another new man, and in four years they gave \$292, \$374, \$595, \$1,003. Another new man and they rose to \$1,600. Another new man and they dropped in three years to \$891, \$876, \$507. Another new man came last year and they immediately rose to \$850. Others show a similar ratio. (Worth thinking over.)