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The place of the pulpit in social reforms

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"The Place of the Pulpit in Social Reforms."

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The Relation of the Pulpit to Social Reforms.

In all the years which have elapsed since the first appearance of reforms of a social nature in the history of man, the word "reform" has been a word to conjure with. Throughout its history the reform spirit has challenged the attention and service of noble and earnest souls, who, incited by the need and the vision of its possibilities have given themselves to the task of reform with vigor and zeal. Revelations of the abuse of the ~~abuse of the~~ privileges of society, and the social sins of the nation have always aroused a deep interest, and have resulted in attempts at reform. A striking fact in the history of reform movements is the conflict of voices which almost invariably arises at every occasion, and often causes the proffered zeal for better social conditions to become so confused as to be practically futile and useless. The problem of social reform is so complex, and yet so vital to social conditions, that even though discussions and suggestions are forthcoming in large numbers, they fail, as a rule, to give any considerable amount of light. So intricate is the problem that men are not able to fathom it, even though persuaded of its importance and urgency. In no field of human activity are clear vision and rational faith more

needed than here.

The nature of society itself is not clearly discerned as yet. We are but at the beginning of an age of social inquiry, and until the fundamental principles of the social nature are clearly seen and understood, social reform must necessarily be slow and disappointing. But the social problem is here, and it is here to stay until its solution is achieved. Shut our eyes as we may, to its existence, the facts, awful and appalling as they at times seem, are before us. The problems of labor and capital, of pauperism, intemperance, crime, the disrupting of the home, the problems of the lower classes, the public health, social purity, amusements, and many others are challenging the attention of earnest souls to-day as never before. We are beginning to inquire whether these things are a necessary part of our social life; whether there is any necessity for the existence of the so-called lower classes; whether there need be vast numbers of people doomed to slavish toil and a life of poverty to provide culture and ease for others; these and many others are the questions men are asking to-day concerning our social conditions.

But this needs no elaboration. There is a full recognition of the growing prominence of the social question in its various aspects, and a general, if not universal

prophecy that the coming century will witness the reconstruction and reorganization of society with the view of attaining a more general well-being, and a wider and more equitable distribution of the privileges and advantages of society.

Now, with the existence of the social problem in its varied and intricate form, the problem of its solution arises. While there have been and will be many attempts from various sources to remedy the ills of society, sources ranging from trade unions to philanthropic organizations, from civic or social clubs to state and national governments, it is our purpose to concentrate our thought on one source in particular--the Church of Jesus Christ, or rather the Pulpit of the Christian Church. The "Pulpit" we shall interpret as the preacher representing the pulpit, not only in church life, but in the facts and forces of social life in the community, state and nation.

These days in which we live, give evidence, when compared with the history of the past, of a new consciousness peculiar to this age. The social order is being rapidly reconstructed. A new emphasis has been placed upon social life. The old individualistic regime has given place to new conditions of social solidarity. Instead of the old isolated plan of industry, and social life, modern life is characterized by the spirit of cooperation and unity.

New inventions, vast improvements in industrial plants, in transportation, in communication have annihilated the old-time conditions of slow manufacture, and its accompanying inconveniences of slow distribution, and have ushered in a new, busy, alert and strenuous age, not only industrially, but in practically every phase of social life.

The new problems accompanying this change are a challenge to the church of today. In such an environment as this the church may well ponder and consider its duty to the social order. Dr Josiah Strong says "Life must always be adjusted to its environments. A radical change in the latter necessitates a corresponding change in the former. When, therefore, civilization changed from an individualistic to a social type, it constituted a new environment, to which the churches must needs readjust themselves." A Crisis is upon us. Society is in the throes of a great reconstruction. She must be saved from social sins, vices, and corruptions, if God's purpose is to be carried out. Christ came to earth to redeem the world, to rescue men from the evils which oppressed them, and to make the lives of all men what the lives of the children of God should be. The Church of Jesus Christ exists for the purpose of carrying on this very work; its excuse for existence is the salvation of men, the establishment of a sound, healthy life among men, - life based on the true principles

of life,-those of Jesus Christ.

When asked to suggest a remedy for social evils, Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot said, "If the doctrines of Christianity that are found in the New Testament could be applied to human society, I believe the solution of the social problem could be got at." He believes this to be true, as members of the Church of Christ, and believers in His Kingdom. The work of the church, then, is to labor for this ideal of human life, and the work of the pulpit is not simply to conduct the ritualistic service, and lead in the formal worship of God, but by means of practical, earnest effort and leadership bring to pass the things that will make this ideal possible.

The individualistic standpoint not only in society as a whole, but in the work of the Church has been characteristic of the past. Great stress was laid upon the work for the individual, and his salvation, and little was made of the social duties of the Christian. Personal relation to Jesus Christ was the chief end to be attained in Church work and effort. The broad vision of the salvation of the social order was hardly conceived. the great social problems which affect life to such a vast extent were considered as fields for moralists, and economists, but outside the realm of the Church's mission. To preach Christ, the historical Son of God, and Savior

of the world to individual men, was the essence of the pulpit's task.

This great work of spiritualizing the individual is not to be discounted; the first duty of the Church is to save men from their sin, to "seek and to save the lost." The Church must always emphasize evangelism as a large part of its mission. Men must be won to God and to the Christian life if society is kept from disaster. But however great the emphasis and need of individual regeneration, the social sins, in the form of institutions, customs or organizations which need to be bettered or changed, are just as truly in need of attention from the Church of God. Important as individual regeneration may be, social reorganization on Christian principles is equally important. To save men from the fact and consequences of sin is a glorious achievement, and worthy of every effort and even sacrifice, for it cost the Son of God his life, but the problem of making the world a better place to live in surely ought not to be omitted from the program of him who is called to proclaim the message of righteousness, and to aid in ushering in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. If Christ's kingdom is to come and His will be done, they must be brought to pass in all the avenues of our modern life, social and civic, as well as religious, and the standards of conduct and ethical life set up by

the Master must become the general standards of society. This application of the principles of Christianity to the problems of modern life, then, is the great task of the Church of God; to seek and to save lost society is the challenge to the Church of to-day.

But how can the Church best achieve results or set to work to attain this ideal? Is it proper for the Church to enter every field of social reform and wage the contest with unabated zeal for the establishment of just and righteous conditions of social life? Can it identify itself with untried experiments of social change, or can it once for all interpret its call to repentance and its message of love and righteousness in terms of special legislation? We think not. Some would have the Church formulate a definite program of social reforms, run candidates for all electoral offices, and aim practically to administer the government from the standpoint of righteousness. But more than once in the history of the history of the Church has that institution endeavored to make itself the master of the state, even with the best of intentions for the well-being of society, only in the long run to lose more than it has gained. We are not devoid of object lessons of such failures if we go no farther than the history of the Roman Church. The glaring failure of the Church in its long history teaches us this,

if nothing more, that Church and state are better administered under separate and distinct organization, neither one interfering with the other's rights and prerogatives.

There must be a line drawn somewhere, however, as to how far the Church shall go in social reforms. All who know the situation agree that it is with great difficulty that arbitrary limits are placed on the efforts of the Church in this direction, and yet practically all are of the opinion that such limitations are necessary. The question of drawing the line, then, appears to be a serious one. To define with sufficient exactness just what specific reforms the Church should champion, is a question which each will be obliged to answer from his own standpoint. Prof. J. M. Barker's theory is that in general, the Church should confine its social reform activities within the limits of health and morals. Whatever concerns the physical and moral well-being of society concerns the Church of Jesus Christ in a vital manner. The Church must always be unsatisfied while the social state in which it lives falls short of the highest ideals and practices in these realms of morals and health. To fail in either is to seriously endanger the social life. The past indifference of the Church to these duties is a reproach upon its name, but even

though it be guilty of indifference, it must, while endeavoring to make amends for the laxity of the past, not forget its limitations. The Church should stand ready at all times to inspire, to co-operate, to sacrifice if need be, in order that changes for the betterment of social life may be possible.

Some social reforms are already being conducted by agencies and organizations outside the Church. The attitude of the pulpit to these should, of course, be one of co-operation. Whenever the pulpit can be of signal service in the aid of such organizations, it should be a privilege to co-operate, and extend its sympathy. The place of the pulpit, then, with regard to organized forces in social reform is one of emphasis in its utterances on sympathy and co-operation. The pulpit, as such, has no direct call to participate in these reforms, but this does not mean that the members of the Church shall not be active in reform effort. The very aloofness of the Church from politics, for instance, makes it a refuge and an inspiration to those who are engaged in the battle of righteousness on the field of politics. The real problem of the Church is the problem of inspiring and uplifting, to which the witness for righteousness of every true member contributes. Its power is the power of men in touch with the Spirit of God, united, and co-operating for

the realization of all good aims. Nothing which is a boon to man in the right and true sense is foreign to its thought. At the same time it would be unwise and uncalled for to give its unquestioned approval and hearty support to a measure or reform which would prove a dividing or diverting element in the spiritual work to which Christ has called his Church.

But there are surely reforms which call forth not only the sympathy, but the activity of the Church, and such activity as will not interfere with the spiritual work of the Church. If so, what are they, and how should the pulpit proceed with relation to them? In general, if the reforms in question are necessary, and as yet have no organization to support them or further their cause, the privilege of the Church is to institute them by a proclamation of their need, and thus secure for them public attention; to foster them until the burden of their existence and advocacy is placed where it belongs. Here the office of the pulpit is chiefly to awaken the sense of social sin and bring to light the wrongs of society, to inspire activity against them, and to study ways and means of bringing about reform. Each man in the pulpit, however, must seriously ^{consider} how he may best serve the kingdom--whether as a teacher of specific reforms, or as the prophet of the principles of the

kingdom in their fundamental outline, or as both. The man who keeps silence because of the fear of man, whether in advocating special reforms or urging his fundamental principles is no true Christian preacher. He is but a hireling, and will flee when the wolf appears.

There are some specific reforms to which the pulpit should give not only its sanction, but its whole-souled co-operation and effort, and even its leadership. These border on the considerations of health and morals. Among such reforms might be mentioned the problem of the public health, the amusement question, the gambling evil, social purity, civic righteousness and the temperance problem. In fact, the Church can never be indifferent to any reform involving moral questions.

To re-enforce and illustrate the place of the pulpit in social reforms, two or three special reforms might be mentioned, and the duty and opportunity of the pulpit in relation to them outlined.

The special duty of the pulpit in social reforms is to aid in the suppression of organized forms of iniquity, such as gambling, brothels and the saloon. We shall choose these three reforms as the fields in which to illustrate the proper relation of the pulpit.

One of the greatest curses of the American people is the gambling spirit that pervades nearly every element

of the population. The fundamental principle of all good government is violated by gambling in any form. The presumption of the law is that man has acquired his property honestly, and it is the policy of every well regulated government that he shall not be deprived of it without a fair equivalent. The principle of gambling is to receive something for which you do not give a just return, or to give anything for which you do not receive an equal value. The farmer gives produce for his gains, and the mechanic renders the product of labor and skill for his financial reward, but the gambler gives the sleights of useful skill, or more often downright cheating. Gambling is a vice, and one of the worst of vices. Not even the liquor traffic in all its cumulative iniquity and evil influence can surpass the record of organized forms of gambling in low trickery, in defiance of law, and in the corruption of courts and legislatures. To carry their ends these organizations do not scruple to employ every vile art and every mean and ignoble device known to cunning and unscrupulous men. Honor, truth and fair dealing are not in their vocabulary. Gambling interests have gone into politics, and in the State of New Jersey once secured control of both branches of the state legislature. A "starter" at the Gloucester race track was chosen speaker of the House

of Representatives, and the proprietor of the same resort had himself elected to the same body. In 1893 both branches of the legislature passed, over the veto of Governor Verts, three bills, extending many new privileges and immunities to the gamblers and their backers. This caused such an agitation by the righteous citizens that the gamblers were finally routed from the legislature, and laws were finally passed wiping out every race track in New Jersey.

No vice is more fatal than gambling, to the virtue of integrity, to high social relations, to a worthy estimate of the value of life. To the passion for gambling must be charged up a large proportion of business failures, broken families, loss of reputation, defalcations and suicides. Society is feebly conscious that it is being defrauded, makes laws against certain forms of gambling, enforces them irregularly, and all the time is raising more gamblers.

What is the duty of the pulpit to a reform movement against this vice? We should say that a direct appeal to the consciences of the members of the Church for support and co-operation in the organizations already existing for gambling reform should be a primary step. Through the various channels of church life an excellent opportunity arises to give publicity to violations of the

law, or statements concerning the existing evils of gambling. The pulpit often has an opportunity to become the leader in such movements for reform, and in some cases where no other leader is available, the pulpit is depended upon for leadership, and finds a splendid opportunity to make its influence felt for righteousness and social betterment. Why should not the Church protect itself from the ravages of the gambling evil? The subtle tricks of the promoters of gambling schemes are planned to take advantage of the unwary, and to gather the innocent in the net of vice. The Church is in serious danger so long as the gambling evil is allowed to exist in public life and contaminate the very ones whom the Church is trying to save. The pulpit should make every effort possible, consistent with its place in the Church of God to exterminate the evil, and to remove the conditions which strengthen the temptations to gambling.

In the matter of immorality the same rules and suggestions apply to the pulpit in its stand for reform, with the exception that the nature of the reform does not allow of such openness and publicity as in the case of gambling. Here the evils of immorality in its various phases are nothing short of appalling. The extent to which men and women can go in immorality is only too well illustrated in every city and town. The sexual evil,

with its awful array of facts: abandoned women, outrages against society in the form of the white slave traffic, the attendant evils of vile suggestion in the form of impure pictures and books, the divorce problem---all these combine to make the problem of immorality in the social life of to-day one of the most baffling of all problems. The pulpit, as we have said, is limited in this question by the delicate nature of the problem. Its horrors are of such a nature as to forbid their public description, so that agitation in the pulpit is of necessity cut off. But the quieter work of the pulpit may be enacted in the careful and quiet advocacy of reform through existing organizations. In a community where no such organization exists, or is not represented the pulpit, or the preacher has the opportunity of championing the cause of reform, and securing aid from his sympathizers to the end of enforcing the existing law, or securing the passage of a law to remedy the existing evil.

Of all the organized forces of iniquity the most visible of all in its effects is the saloon. It is the enemy of the public because of the evil results it brings to the lives of its victims. It supplies no legitimate need in human life, but on the other hand is one of the greatest forces in existence in discounting

the value of man among his fellows, in destroying his self-respect, in menacing his home and family, not to speak of its evil influence on the best institutions of society, religion and the Church, the awful toll of human life which the saloon charges annually to the nation and many other grim facts and phases of its evil influence in our social life to-day. "The saloon is making war upon the manhood and womanhood of the nation, and depleting the ranks of its citizenship." The saloon is a social menace, and as such is the enemy of all social patriots.

It is an exceedingly interesting fact that efforts for temperance in Bible history are all made in connection with religion. In both Old and New Testaments intemperance is treated as one of the moral evils, and as such is to be driven out, not simply by fighting against it, but by the power of a new spiritual life. Almost all temperance movements have originated with the Church, and have been conducted by Church people. Even in the early Christian centuries the Church took the lead in temperance activity. Church temperance societies to-day are many in number, and the leading temperance organizations such as the Anti-Saloon League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union may almost be termed Church organizations.

The main function of the pulpit is to create a moral

sense in the community, as we saw was its function in all reforms in which it participates. The pulpit's atmosphere-creating power is the lever with which it works to bring reforms to pass, or at least to initiate them. Temperance sermons, Sunday School lessons, local Church temperance organization, the spread of literature, the use of the Church building for purposes of agitation, the leadership of the pulpit in the work of rescuing victims from the power of the saloon monster, and the giving of moral support to all temperance reform activities---these are the functions of the Church and of the pulpit. Existing as it does to make the world a better place in which to live, and to point humanity to the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, let it continue in its glorious work not only in its emphasis on individual regeneration and redemption, but also in its wide vision of social salvation, and the use of its powers and influences toward the salvation of the whole race of humanity, and the ushering in of a new and glorious age, wherein dwelleth righteousness, ⁱⁿ which the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

Thomas Ross Hicks.