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The Church and the working man

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THE CHURCH AND THE WORKING MAN.

The ethics of the social problem is at present, a fertile field for thought, and experiment. The world of today is becoming aware of the need of religious principles in all social intercourse. The intense interest in social ethics has been manifested by the large number of able treatises recently produced upon this subject, and the ready sale which these works have found. Not only have religious leaders found this to be of paramount importance but students of sociology have been looking toward it as the only solution of their hardest problems.

The need is clearly shown by the present state of the church and the present state of society, together with their mutual relation. The history of the church in all ages shows that it has been inseparably connected with social progress. It has both influenced and been influenced by social progress. The Roman Church acquired and for a long time held a commanding position in world history, but when education and other liberty giving forces were acquired by the rank and file of men, the world threw off its bondage to dogma and under the leadership of the reformers, demanded that the true religious nature of man should have its free course, untrammelled by Pope or Church. With the institution of these pure ideals, the newly formed Protestant Church secured an

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influence over its constituency which equalled that of the early Roman Church.

Such was the church that was planted in the early American Colonies. In establishing a colony a fort was built to protect the people from their temporal foes, the Indians, while a church was built to protect them from their spiritual foes. The church was the social center of the community. The town meeting was held there. Its minister was the principal man in the place. Because of his superior education he had a large part in the control of the district schools. The place of the church was a position of authority so that it controlled the people of the parish. The church had very little ^{trouble} with the non-churchgoers, for there was no such class. There were no industrial problems of how to reach the masses, for there were no such large industries as we have now. Parental authority was such in those days that children were brought up to go to church on Sunday instead of spending the day in recreation and amusement.

As long as people were willing servants of the authority of the church, the church held its power over them. The arbitrary demands of the church, its dogma, its adherence to obsolete customs and its inconsistent members soon changed the willing obedience to unwilling adherence and finally to open indifference. This in brief is a history of the American church, in its rela-

tion to the people. The masses today are either indifferent or openly antagonistic to the church, not so much on the ground of unbelief in what the church stands for, but because of a positive conviction that the church fails to realize its profession.

In discussing historically the condition of the church, we have incidentally given the present condition of society and the relation of the church thereto. It remains to be stated whether this relation is as it should be and if not, what is the proper relation and how can it be attained?

It does not require much argument to convince any open-minded person that the present relation of church to society is far from ideal. It makes no difference from what point of view we look at the matter, the aspect is the same. If we consider what the function of the church should be, our observation clearly shows that the church is not living up to its plain duty. Mr A.M. Fairbairn in his book, "Religion in History and in Modern Life", defines the function of the church as follows; "The function of the church is not simply to maintain an established Christianity, but to create it anew in the spirit and conscience of each successive generation. Each generation must have a Christianity of its own born anew within it and not simply repeating the traditions and appropriating the habits of the fathers." If this be true the church has failed to adapt itself to its environment. There has been an unequal evolution going on in which social

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progress has left the church far behind.

The changes that have brought about the wide separation between the church and the masses of people are classed by Professor Fairbairn as political, social, industrial, and intellectual. The political changes have wrought a complete revolution in government, thru the various stages of monarchy, aristocracy, constitutional monarchy and republic. The power has been transferred from a king to a family of nobles, and from nobles to a parliament, and from parliament to people. While this evolution has been going on in the state, there has been practically no change in the church. To be sure the power passed from Pope to Bishops in the Episcopal forms of church government and other denominations. Using the Congregational polity claim to have given every member an equal voice, but the fact is that church government is today practically an aristocracy. Those who make up official boards and prudential committees, with whom the power is lodged, are of the wealthy and influential class. They not only regulate the finances of the church, but also the spirit of all its activity. The result is that the church today is several hundred years behind its contemporary political development. It is impossible, therefore, to maintain an aristocratic church in a democratic state.

There has been a radical change in the social spirit of modern times. With our highly specialized industrial life society has become divided into classes and sub-classes almost as distinct

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as the castes of India. Masters and workmen are every year growing farther apart; becoming rivals that fear and distrust each other. The old personal relation between the classes is rapidly being lost. Unconsciously perhaps the churches have followed this tendency to social demarkation, and the more they have done so, the more distasteful have they become to workmen. When the church places a religious sanction upon social distinction it loses the approval of the working class. In other words the church cannot be a class church either for the employing class or for the employees. The attempt that was recently made in New York City to form a church for millionaires was a notable failure. No more can a church composed solely of working men be a success. The rank and file of men will recognize only one standard of classification and that is the New Testament standard of righteousness. This perniciousness social spirit in the church has precluded the possibility of united religious effort. The rich neither know anything about the poor nor do they care to know. They will shun every effort made to bring them into contact with the working classes. An employer moves into the vicinity of his factory and the church where many of his employees attend. He chooses however a larger church of the same denomination down town with the self-confessed explanation that it would interfere with his control of his men if he were obliged to associate with them in church relations.

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The wife of an overseer in the cotton mills with a good income is surprised to learn that a fellow church member, who is a weaver in the same mill, receives the meagre average wage of ten dollars a week and out of it is supporting a wife and four children. It seems to me that the real ground for the alienation of the masses of working people from the church may be traced directly to these class distinctions.

The industrial development of modern times must take its share of the responsibility for the non-religious practises of the working people. When it becomes so difficult to earn a living that a man must spend his entire time at his occupation there is little chance for religious exercises. In order to worship there must be not only "a day of rest for the man but a rested man for the day." The struggle for self maintenance is so great that its worries and cares leave no time for meditation upon higher things. The result of this industrial development has been to make workmen alive only to their occupation and dead to every thing else. It is hard to secure their interest in education or art or religion simply because all desire for these things has been excluded by the industrial demands. Cities establish night schools but they are not widely patronized by the toilers. Mill owners have made improvements in their factories for the express purpose of inspiring high ideals of self cultivation but the working people are slow to use them.

This means that the present rules of industry impose burdens that are grinding out the very souls of the working classes. It is difficult for the church to know what to do with a condition of this sort. Progress must necessarily be slow. Much is being done in the right direction; more ought to be done.

While the industrial development has been almost phenomenal the intellectual development has shown almost equal progress. There is a remarkable mental activity on the part of every one. Daily newspapers, magazines, and library books are accessible to all so that the general education of today is far in advance of that of yesterday. The public school system has spread thru out the land until every state makes the education of its children compulsory. While all these things are helping on the cause of secular education, very little is being done for religious education. The Sunday Schools meet for one hour on one day of the week; they are provided with teachers who give their services and have no special training. There is very little religious instruction in the home compared with former times. The result of this condition of things is the larger interest in secular training and in the subjects taught and the proportionately diminishing interest in religious education and especially in religion itself.

Mr Richard T. Ely in his "Social Aspects of Christianity", gives us a further explanation for the alienation of the working

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classes from the church. He says that the negative attitude of the church on social questions is largely responsible for the wide-spread indifference of the masses of working people. The church will point out the errors of socialism and the errors of Henry George and so on but never speaks anything positively about the truths of socialism or the good of the workingmen. The demands of labor organizations which are in accord with Gospel teachings scarcely ever receive so much as an "Amen" from the church. Mr Ely mentions an instance where the bakers in New York sent petitions to the clergymen of the city to take some action to help them to a Sunday rest day, for up to that time they were working seven days a week. Out of the five hundred circulars sent out only six answered. A preacher's meeting in Pittsburg learned that a gentleman had given money for public conservatories on condition that they should be kept open on Sunday. The meeting passed formal resolutions against the acceptance of the money. From these incidents Mr Ely truly concludes that the churches have not only been negative in their attitude toward those things that would help the masses but have been positively aggressive against them.

He further urges that the failure of the church to rebuke wickedness in high places is a grievance which the working man cannot easily overlook. The poor sinner is condemned but the wealthy one is condoned. The working man has the idea that the

clergy are the servants of the wealthy since they are supported by them and they keep quiet about their sins. This fact is well understood by many a good minister, who would proclaim the truth as he believes it were not his tongue tied by the wealthy members of his parish.

Mr Ely also cites another cause for the separation of the church and the working people. The church has laid great emphasis in the past upon righteousness not for the sake of this world but as a condition of entrance into the future world. This misplaced emphasis has begotten an artificial notion in the minds of the majority concerning the function of the church. The working-man is obliged to contend with the living present. It is all he can do to provide for his family day by day. When the present demands all one's attention, there is left very little time for the consideration of the future. It is a good sign of the times that the church is preaching a present day religion for present day needs and is making the question of the future incidental rather than fundamental. This is the only kind of a Gospel that will ever reach the working classes.

The foregoing enumeration of causes not only indicates that the working classes have been estranged from the church but also that this relation is far from a proper one. Let us consider then what is the mission of the church. If the function of the church as previously stated is to be carried out, the church must adapt

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itself to its environment. Each of the reasons for alienation presents an opportunity for the church, but the fundamental mission of the church if properly understood and fulfilled will take care of these difficulties. A study of the Bible reveals this mission. The church has interpreted its duty to be the salvation of individuals and while this is good as far as it goes, there is a field of work for the church to undertake which has been overlooked. While it is true that society is made up of individuals it is also true that the social structure presents problems that can only be approached in a social way. The Old Testament is very clear in its social lessons. It represents God as establishing and maintaining a righteous nation. Individual morals are not overlooked but the weight of its teaching concerns the welfare of the nation. Social duties were enjoined upon every member of Israel. Their privileges and property rights were held as a sacred trust from Jehovah. If they abused these rights the nation was made accountable. It was the nation that was rewarded for its righteousness by victory over surrounding peoples and it was the nation that was punished for its wickedness by defeat and captivity. Righteousness for the present life rather than the world to come was the exhortation from each prophet. These holy men of God pointed out the sins of the age such as, the oppression of the poor, idolatry, and vice.

Christ embodied these same principles in his teaching but gave

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them a broader significance. Religion with him was not identical with the state as in the Jewish theocracy but a principle which is the foundation of all government and society. He insisted that the motive of every act should be right and taught a code of ethical principles which are the guide of society as well as individuals. But while he emphasized religious principles he exemplified these principles in practical life. He himself set an example of service. "He ate with publicans and sinners, touched the leper and cleansed him, opened the eyes of the poor beggar that cried to him from the street; he went about encouraging the poor, curing the sick and ministering to the daily wants and needs of men."

He not only helped the needy but he attacked the social evils of his day. The scribes and Pharisees and hypocrites and money changers were not allowed to pass unscourged. It is not strange that the Socialists of today look back to Christ as the first Socialist for they see in him the champion of their cause. His parting command to his disciples was not only, "As ye go, preach, but also heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give."

Christ's law of love and the Golden Rule stand forever in the way of the present unequal distribution of wealth and the property privileges which it allows. The principle of human brotherhood which grows out of all Christ's teachings points to the goal of the Christian church. That principle is the chief corner-stone of

the kingdom of God. While the church may not be co-extensive with the kingdom, yet its plain duty according to Christ's command is to establish this kingdom upon the earth. The church must undertake this; for there is no other way for it to be accomplished. A solution for social ills has been sought in legislation, in economic considerations, in co-operation, in socialism and in various other ways but none of them has been satisfactory. The workmen themselves look to the establishment of the principles of Christ as the only solution and it is strange that the church has been so slow in seeing it, also. Therefore the mission of the church is to carry into the social relations the principles inculcated by Christ and this will be found the only true remedy for the separation of the church and the workingman.

Having set up the ideal we will now consider how it may be approached. All experimental studies on the basis of information given by labor leaders arrive at one sweeping conclusion, that the laboring ^{classes} in general believe in Christ and Christianity but they do not believe that the churches represent Christ and Christianity. Therefore if this stands in the way of a more intimate relation between the workingman and the church, it is high time that the church should put forth unquestionable evidence of its fidelity to the person and teaching of Christ. Obviously this is no small task. It means that the spirit of human brotherhood must permeate every department of activity. It means a regeneration of

the employers and a regeneration of the employed. In fact, to say that this will be the means of conciliation is simply a comprehensive statement of the principle that is behind all special schemes of conciliation.

The first thing that the church can do toward promoting a larger confidence on the part of working people, is to abolish all class distinctions. The rich must associate with the poor. They must come to know one another's position. The poor must be made just as welcome to the church service as the rich. If there is any place where the employer and the employee can come together it is the church. When it is fully appreciated by both classes that God is no respecter of persons, there will be less difficulty with the unchurched. The down-town churches in the tenement districts will not be moved up town into the residential districts. The rich and the poor will meet on a level before God and man. The first great duty of the church therefore is to bring men together in brotherly relations.

In the second place the church can show its interest in the workingman thru benevolent activity. "It must practise as well as preach. It must help find men and women work; train incompetent persons to earn a living; visit the sick; help released prisoners to find situations; seek to bring fallen women back to a virtuous life; care for neglected children; support deaconesses to go about speaking encouragement and doing helpful deeds; it must administer

charity, soothe the pillow of the suffering, and speak to the dying of the mercy of Christ." While benevolent giving has done much good, and is still needed, it must be noticed that benevolent activity is what the church needs to win the laboring classes.

In the third place the church must adapt itself to present day needs. We have noted the fact that it has been surpassed by the progress of the secular world and that its methods have not been brought down to date. There are some methods that are good for all times but most methods need continual revision. To begin with the preaching of today lacks timeliness. It is not elegant discourses that are needed but plain, practical sermons that will reach strike home to the heart of every day living. For this the preacher should be a student of the social conditions of the time. He should study to relate the principles of Christ to the social problems that confront his particular community. The teachings of Christ should be interpreted by the substitution of modern conditions in place of those of Christ's time. "The church has probably never faced greater problems than temperance, graft, monopoly, civic virtue, selfish luxury, pleasure-seeking, greed, lack of sense of social responsibility, wrongdoing, justice, charity, the relation between the creation of wealth and its equitable distribution, between the rights of property and the rights of man, the rights of the individual and the greater rights of society; questions of poverty, tenements, sweating system, child-labor,

* President Plauty. The church and the Social Problem.

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socialism, and a score of other creeds and theories pervading the social and religious world; and the church has a vast task on hand to throw on these problems the search-light of Christian ethics, to sift them by the principles of the Christian religion." If the preacher will spend some time studying these questions which are uppermost in the minds of the working people, and apply to them his best knowledge of the principles of Christ, he will not have to preach long to empty pews.

The church must also adapt its methods of work to the present conditions. The Sunday preaching services and the mid-week prayer meeting have not proved themselves sufficient to hold the masses of the people. In seeking for other forms of work, the institutional church has become successful. It meets the physical needs of the people and prepares the way for the spiritual. The institutional church has proved its right to existence by the fact that its increase in membership has been six times as great as that of other churches.

Again much may be accomplished by adapting practise to belief. The trouble with the church has been not its lack of belief in the teachings of Christ but its refusal to put its belief into practise. As Mark Guy Pearse has well said, "Men are ready to offer their prayers on Sunday if on Monday they may go into the market place and skin their fellows and sell their hides." When the labor leaders of this country were asked, "Do you think that employers

who are members of churches are more considerate of the rights of labor than other employers?", the almost unanimous opinion was that Christian men were as hard, as exacting, as oppressive, as willing to cut down wages to the starving point as any class of men engaged in business." The value of practical religion on the part of church members cannot be overestimated.

In the fourth place, the church must stand as the educator of both capital and labor in the ideals of Christian socialism. The capitalist must be shown that his wealth is given him by God to be well used. Upon him is the obligation of good stewardship. He is not obedient to his simple duty if he uses it dishonestly or spends it extravagantly. A man is just as much accountable for the good use of his money as he is for the good use of his hand or brain. The general public is growing impatient with those men who spend hundreds of thousands on the luxuries of their private life. Is it any wonder that the workingman does not care to worship with the millionaire?

Again the employer should be taught to look after the good of the employee. Most employers consider that their obligation to their workmen ceases when they have paid them their weekly wage. This is not true. Practically they are in partnership. The employer shares in the earnings of his men and more than this he owes them the moral obligation contained in such Christian precepts as "The strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak" and "Bear ye one

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another's burdens; and so fulfill the law of Christ." Most important of these obligations is that of kindly interest and courtesy. As far as possible the employer ought to know his men or at least treat those kindly whom he does know. The obligation of providing sanitary conditions in the factory and mill is a most imperative one. Many mills are poorly ventilated; the light is bad; dust is abundant; the heating is defective and the machinery is poorly protected. Every Christian employer should feel himself religiously bound to provide comfortable ^{places} for his men to work in. Employers could easily undertake the obligation of the moral and intellectual development of their men or at least they should seek to encourage it. Enough has been done in this direction to prove its high value.

On the other hand, the laboring man should be made aware of his obligation to his employer. The employer should have justice at the hands of the working man. Not all property is the result of avarice; not all rich men are selfish and stingy. The rich are giving annually over a hundred millions of dollars. There is a different value that must be placed upon brain work than that upon purely manual labor. The laboring man has yet to learn that his cause cannot be furthered by extravagant denunciations of the rich. The working man must also learn the dignity of labor. The church can teach this by giving him an equal place with the rich. Labor is made honorable when its sons are not despised as social outcasts.

The working man needs an exhortation to faithful and honest labor. Most of them are grumbling because they are giving their employer more than their money's worth. Accordingly they plod along in a dissatisfied way, shirking at every step, caring nothing but to get in their time. It is not strange that employers are slow to grant an increase of wages, when they know that the men will work no harder than before. Furthermore labor has been slow to see the progress that has been made in improving its condition. Legislation has cut down the hours of work, Sunday labor and child labor. It has appointed inspectors to see that the laws concerning sanitation were carried out. There is being developed on every hand a strong public sentiment in sympathy with the laborer's position. An appreciation of these things would do much to quiet the dissatisfaction of the masses. The church must inculcate high ideals of self improvement in the minds of the working classes. The laborer must learn that he will improve his condition only as he improves himself. Every thing that stimulates such a cultivation ought to be promoted by the church. In summing up the work of the church in the solution of the social problem, we must revert to our introductory paragraph. Men must be imbued with the moral ideals of Jesus Christ, before they can attain to a satisfactory social condition.

It is evident from the discussion thus far that the church is facing a social crisis. The working man has come to himself. He is

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gradually getting more power within his control: He needs direction and will get it some where. If he does not get it from the church he will get it from the labor agitator or social demagogue. In the latter cases he works out his own ruin and consequently the ruin of all society. As a matter of self protection to say nothing of aggressive enterprise the church is obliged to meet this crisis. It demands studious consideration on the part of the leaders of the church. Mr Ely recommends that one-half the time spent by our preachers in theological schools should be given to the study of social problems. The church must get rid of its negative apathy towards social reform and get into line with the labor forces for mutual improvement. One thing is certain that if the masses are left to the present process of natural selection, it will not be long before they are extinguished.

In the last few years however, the church has made an honest attempt to face this crisis. It has established many branches of philanthropic work among the laboring classes. Its hospitals and asylums are open to the sick and unfortunate. Its elementary schools and colleges are providing education for any one who desires it at a nominal cost. The social settlement inaugurated by Alfred Toynbee in London has been duplicated in most of our large cities with great success. The institutional church, already referred to is being rapidly multiplied in the cities of the land. The Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. with their educational and physical

work together with employment bureaus and the like are doing a wonderful work for the laboring classes. Religious papers are devoting much space to social problems. The leading pulpits are heeding the appeal of the laboring man and championing his cause. The church has been honored by the selection of men from its ranks to arbitrate in labor disputes. The leading Protestants have established unions for the express purpose of studying the labor situation, with a view to bringing it in intelligent form before the church.

It is not overestimating the truth to say that as far as activity is concerned, the churches of today are meeting the social crisis heroically. The spirit of sacrifice which lies at the bottom of human brotherhood and which alone is a cure for the social ills, will not develop in a moment. It will be generated and increased by the lines of Christian work already suggested. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in emptying himself of the glory that he had with the Father, and taking upon himself the form of a servant, and the fashion of a man and the humble obedience which led him to give his life on the cross for the betterment of mankind,—this same sacrifice must in some miraculous way inspire the lives of modern church members before there can be a reconciliation of the church and the working man.

— Millard L. Robinson —

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