

Churches for Truth and Justice

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A man said to me the other day, in speaking of the relation of churches to social problems, "If they claim supernatural powers and supernatural origin, hold them to supernatural results." That seems to me to strike at the heart of much of the criticism that has been directed against the Church and its shortcomings. The failures and the limitations of the churches in their work are tremendous when compared with the pretensions of the Church. A just sense of modesty might save their hearts as well as their dignity. In much of the discussion concerning the various and sundry "crises" that "The Church" is facing, one is reminded unconsciously of a street scene on a September evening when some vender of "choice wares," by the light of a flaming torch, expounds the virtues of his particular cure-all. The following passage is of this character.

The average Protestant layman, though he may be a nominal church member, does not realize the importance of the church. He does not clearly see or fully appreciate the fact that it provides the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life; that it stands guard over the sanctities of the home; that it safeguards property with protection that no police force provides; that it contributes to the market-place the moral influences most needed there; that it equips the court with principles of justice without which human society would dissolve; and that it constantly replenishes the enthusiasms that support education.²

While hardly intended as such, this is the most cruel criticism of the Church that I have heard from either friend or

¹ While there is no explicit date on this manuscript, it can be dated both by the date of the publication of the first quote—see next footnote—and by the fact that it is among a group of manuscripts from 1909-11.

² J. J. Crooker, "The Crisis in the Church," *Unity*, Vol. LXIV, No. 25, February 17, 1910, p. 810.

foe. To make the Church positively and aggressively responsible for the "chief motives, ideals, restraints and discipline" of modern life is really too much. Up to this point the most brutal criticisms have condemned the church more for neglect of duty, or cringing subserviency, than for deliberate and constructive effort in producing the conditions of our social order today. This passage asserts that the church should be supported because it does do these very things; but that is the very point at issue. On the one hand, it is criticized because it has failed in supplying the just protection to private property, in furnishing just principles for the courts, and in replenishing the ideals of education. On the other hand, if it be demonstrated that the Church has furnished these values to modern society, and society in its existing order, is following the lead of the Church, then the Church is open to the criticism of having delivered false values. In either case, the Church, presuming to be responsible for all the good of the existing order, must also accept the responsibility for its glaring defects. Here is the pith of all the criticisms against the Church. It is the unwarranted pretensions of "The Church" or churches that exasperate one, and call forth the stinging rebukes. It would be reassuring to hear the churches cry out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." If I mistake not, churches are thus crying today. At any rate the assumption that "The Church" or a church has some private monopoly on "the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and disciplines of life," that it can grind them out, and furnish them ready-made in standard sizes to all comers, is an unworthy survival of the Middle Ages. To use a phrase once used by John Wise, "It smells of the Pope's kitchen."³

³ John Wise (1652-1725) was a Congregational minister and political leader in Massachusetts during the colonial period. He is notable for asserting the principle of no taxation without representation many years before it became a central issue in fomenting the Revolution. Earl Davis did his STB thesis at Harvard on John Wise. This turn of phrase about "the Pope's kitchen" was part of John Wise's response in 1715 to a proposal to establish a "National Church" as part of an attempt to revive the waning influence of the clergy—the "New England Theocracy"—in colonial New England. As John Wise put it, these attempts to revive the clergy, "smells very strong of the Infallible Chair, ... smells of the Pope's cooks and kitchen where his broths and restorations are prepared." See J. H. Allen, "What New England Congregationalism Really Meant," in *The Unitarian Review and*

The Church is one among the institutions of society. It is at once, a monument to human ideals and life values of the past and the organized channel through which men and women have sought to satisfy a need of humanity. As such it shares in all the imperfections and limitations of society as a whole. It is not, never has been, and cannot be, a complete entity apart from all the institutions of society, and able to produce at will the eternal values, and train the whole strength of its organized force upon the task of their realization. For the most part the same people who make up the body of the church, also make up the body of society. The ideals of the one are reflected in the other, both good and bad. The vital living force that produces our "chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life" is not in the institution, but in the human life that supports and builds the institution as the channel for common purpose and common effort. It is gratuitous to speak of the attitude of "The Church" towards this debated problem or that. It has no attitude any more than society as a whole has an attitude. Individual churches will have an attitude toward a given problem. This attitude will be determined by the attitude of the people who make up the church. Their mental, moral and economic status and development will determine their attitude. When a new and divisive issue appears, some churches will take one attitude and others will take another, while still others will split. This fact is illustrated again and again in history.

In all this growth-process of society, the churches have a part. They are subject to the same demands of utility and efficiency of function in the social order as other institutions. Its function is to seek, {??}, and realize in life the great life values. Just what those values are, and just how they are to be attained is open to question, as the various interpretations of religious experience bear witness. But whether the life value be conceived of as future salvation, personal character, or social sense, the function of the churches is the same. As to fundamental motive and purpose, there can hardly be question. The moral integrity of any church, its people or its ministers, or any fellowship of churches, is determined by the sincerity and fidelity, by the motive of its

activity. If any minister or any people violate the integrity of motive, let them answer for it.

But there is room for a wide and honest difference of opinion as to the nature of these values and the way and manner in which they may be realized. Without assuming infallibility, or questioning the integrity of any who differ from me, I want to state what seems to me must be the inevitable attitude toward the social questions of churches in which the spirit of modern thought is predominate. The social unrest of our times in the political and industrial fields as well as in the religious aspects of life is the witness to a profound revolution that is going on in our midst. The modern world is working towards a new social ideal. The ideal of the ancient world was expressed in classic form in Plato's conception of justice as embodied in *The Republic*. A ruling class of intellectuals guided the state. A warrior class, obedient to the philosophers, guarded the state, while the work was done for all of society by the laboring class, whose function in society was to work and to obey. The most complete expression of this ideal appears in the social order of the Holy Roman Empire, with the church as the intellectual class, the princes and lay nobility as the warrior class. The serfs were the laboring class, whose task was implicit, obedience to, and support of, the upper classes.

Since the beginning of the Reformation society has been engaged in the task of replacing the social order of the Middle Ages by a social order in which the principles of democracy shall find expression. The alleged authority of the Church has been transferred from the Papal monarch to the people at large. Truth has come to be regarded as the gleanings of human experience in the world-life instead of an unnatural revelation from outside. The old ideal of the divine right of monarch has been replaced by the principle that the right to rule rests in the people. The ruler is not a lord and master, but a servant carrying out the will of the people. The political right has been largely socialized. In the same way, we have universalized the idea of sacred writings. Today the problem in theology is one of socializing the ideal of manhood. Is Jesus the revealing type of human perfection, or is he simply one of those who have been reaching out after the human ideal, and making his contribution? Is the source of the ideal of human life in Jesus as Monarch, or is it in the common life? Is he the lord and

master of humanity in this aspect of life, or is he a servant who has done a noble work for humanity?

The same forces and principles are at work in the political and industrial life. Are property and property interests the lords and masters of humanity, in whose service humanity is to sacrifice every value that conflicts with their greedy demands? The question is ethical. Are we to have a social order in which material wealth shall be the monarch, and rule over us with an iron hand in all its nakedness, or with an iron hand covered by a silk glove? The same principle is at stake today that was at stake when the Puritans were struggling against the accepted principle of the divine right of kings to rule, and the divine obligation of subjects to obey. Today we are contending against the idea of the "divine" right of the commercial and industrial system and its profits. It is in fact our lord and master, as the disclosures of political and industrial activities demonstrate. The system has not been particular how this position of mastership has been gained, as the revelations of corrupt practices show. But, its rule is no longer held unchallenged. All over the country are the evidences of a great uprising against the overlordship of the "System." It is a struggle between the rights of personality and the rights of concentrated wealth and power. Shall the great industrial system be the servant of human life, contributing to its growth, development, and to the emancipation of personality? Or, shall it be the lord and master, to whose word of command we shall submit, and upon whose alter we shall lay our sacrifices of degradation, poverty, debauchery, corruption, and even life itself? Shall the many become the servile subjects of the industrial and commercial system, or shall the system become the servant of the many? Has this structure of modern life, into whose building has gone the labor, the brains, and the interminable hours of toil and the suffering of millions of people, the right of way? Has the creature become the master of the creator? Is society to remain plutocratic, or shall it become democratic? In the one case, we will have the subjection of the rights of humanity to the interests of wealth and things. In the other case, we will assert the supremacy of human life, to be assisted and supported in its pursuit of the great human values, by the institution which it has created for that very purpose. Shall the institution be the master or the servant of man? That is the essence of the social question today, just as

at an earlier day the question was as to whether the government should be the master or the servant of human life.

Now towards all this problem, "the Church" has had, and can have, no common attitude in the very nature of things. Churches which are identified with "what is" by all their life values, must, of necessity, identify themselves with the values that they believe in. The supremacy of tradition, authority, institutionalism, and formalism in religion, go hand in hand with the supremacy of industrialism in the social order at large. In either case, the interests of human life and progress, whether in the case of the individual or of humanity, are made subservient to the interests of existing institutions. One can see the forces of society at present lining up according to these principles. On the other hand, those churches and those people who believe that institutions of whatever nature are the natural product of human values, and are of use only so far as they serve the larger interests of human life and adapt to the human needs, must take a position quite the opposite from the former. They must, by the very nature of their mental and moral makeup, in conformity to their life values, hold that institutions must serve human life, and conduct themselves according to this principle. Now it is evident that in most of our churches the principle [that] human life is lord of the Sabbath will obtain.

The immediate problem before us, therefore, is the relation of the churches of the latter type to the central question upon which all forces of society are directing their attention. The objection is often made, when this question of the relation of churches to social problems is raised, that the churches have to do only with individuals, that their function is simply to influence and stimulate the life values of individual men and woman. If any man comes in contact directly with the business and commercial atmosphere today, he will soon find that pious teachings in the churches are contradicted every single hour of the day by the facts of life in the industrial order. In church he may learn that human life is sacred, but in business life he learns that it is not. He may learn in the churches that the home is sacred, but in business life he soon finds that homes are being ruined, and all the most holy relations of life are trampled upon. While we are producing enough to more than satisfy the needs of the nation, children are going hungry, mothers are working in the mills and factories, children and

young people are compelled by bread and butter necessity to work when they ought to be at school or at play. In church one may learn that we should love and honor justice, but once in the grip of the world, he knows that money is the thing loved, that a premium is placed upon dishonesty, and every consideration is sacrificed to the dollar. This is not an exaggerated statement. I have heard that from the experience of most careful and intelligent businessmen. One man in particular said, "It is not difficult to make money, but it is difficult to make it honestly." He is not a fanatic. Start in the task of developing ideals and goodness in an individual, and follow that individual ten steps outside the walls of the church building, and you come up against the whole steamroller of modern industrialism crushing and grinding those very principles, and those very individuals, into the dirt and gravel along its highway of "prosperity and profits." I am by no means blind to the constructive values of modern industrialism, but the records of corruption, of death by wanton neglect, by unhuman surroundings, and by disease, of the alliance of the System with vice and crime as disclosed by Judge Lindsey, Steffens,⁴ and by personal experience, Great god, is there a man with a particle of red blood in his veins who would not protest, and fight against that cruel wanton sacrifice of human life, and life values by this overlordship of the industrial system today? Get near enough to hear the hissing steam of its hideous inhuman machine, and certainly no live man would be content to say that his exalted aim and purpose is to prepare people to die without complaint beneath its wheels. The thing is a monster, more terrible, more blood-thirsty, and inhuman.

Men and women together in a church fellowship are deciding what seeds are worthwhile to plant and grow in the world-garden of ours. Fools would we be to plant them, and then stand by and see them choked and destroyed by a vicious growth of weeds. As people banded together in a church fellowship our task is not

⁴ Earl Davis refers here to Judge Benjamin Barr Lindsey (1869-1943) who was known as the father of juvenile law and his advocacy for juvenile rights, women's rights and workers' rights; and to Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) an American investigative journalist and a leading "muckraker" of the Progressive Era. In 1906 Lincoln Steffens wrote a series of articles in *McClure's Magazine* about Ben Lindsey: "Ben Lindsey, The Just Judge," October, November and December issues, 1906.

merely to sit together quietly before a cheerful open fire, and talk about and describe the beautiful flowers and the delicious fruit that we might produce if it were not for those vicious weeds. Our task is quite as much out in the world-garden preparing the soil, pulling out the weeds, root and branch, nurturing and caring for the values that we wish to produce. In doing this work, we may break up into groups or we may go forth as a body, that is not so important so long as we do the work.

Now these free churches came to their birth in their struggles against the overlordship of an institution. They have always held to the supremacy of personality over the interests of the conflicting institution. The very breath that gave them birth was the breath of freedom and the fostering mother that developed them was the ideal of the ethical expression of religious feelings. Now that we come face-to-face today with problems that involved the life or death of the freedom that gave us birth, and the foster-mother that nourished us, what are we to do? There is but one thing for us to do. Out into the world-garden we must go to fight for justice, for truth, for righteousness, for human life, and the great life values, to fight with the God spirit, and to be brave soldiers in the army for humanity. I despise that appeal that makes capital out of the unrest of our times, and hopes to build therefrom a great ecclesiastical institution. God forbid that any church should ever thus prey upon the discontent and the suffering of human life to increase its size or fill its coffers, that it may say to the world, "Behold how large and powerful we are." If our work is not inspired by a single-eyed love for truth, and humanity, then let us cease where we are. A thousand times more valuable to society is the hide-bound institution that, out of all sincerity of purpose, clings with the tenacity of despair to that which is decaying, when compared with the institution that, with a disingenuous duplicity, capitalizes [on] the unrest of our times for its own advancement. Any work that may be done in the world-garden, must be done in all integrity. So there is our task. The spirit of the fathers sends us to it. The love of humanity leads us to it. We must follow as the guiding light of our ideal shall point the way.

Once out in the world-garden, what do we find? Some people seem to think that outside of the churches there are vast hordes of men and women who are languishing to enlist under the standards of the ideal. Not so. The vast hordes are as society

as a whole. They accept its standards, and follow in its conventional pathways. No one need delude himself with the hope that so soon as he shall hoist his banner, the multitudes will flock to it. The task is not so easy. The world-ground may lie fallow, as Prof. Doan⁵ says, but before the flowers bloom there is a long, tedious process before us. But with such a small group to do the work, how hopeless the task? "Not so," again I say. The world forces work even till now for human life and human freedom. Here and there you will come across some individual, in whom the seed of the modern world ideal has found lodgment. He will know you, and you will know him. Henceforth you will work together. As time goes on the number will increase, and by and by the small group becomes the great body, and before it knows what has happened, it has stirred the whole social order from its apathy, it has set people to work for truth and humanity. It has become a live full-grown man a work for humanity.

⁵ Earl Davis likely refers to Frank Carleton Doan (1877-1927), Ph.B. Ohio State, 1898, A.M., Harvard, 1900, Ph.D. Harvard, 1904. He was a professor of psychology at Ohio State, and of Philosophy, Religion and Systematic Theology at Meadville Theological College. In 1913 he left the academy to become a Unitarian minister, in which he continued until he retired in 1925.