

The Churches and Socialism

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

1910¹

I have a way of stopping just where I ought to begin. The subject for the paper this morning calls for so much, that I cannot stop by the way for explanation in some of the statements that I shall make. If perchance I seem to be harsh or brutal in my remarks, remember that it may be only an impression due to enforced brevity. At least I do not want you to say or feel that any of the remarks that I shall make are simply passing whims, or momentary opinions that will pass away before I have left the room. Every statement is well-considered and made with cool deliberate appreciation of its full meaning. There are three things that I want to say. The first thing has to do with the churches themselves. The second has to do with the relation of the churches to social problems, or the social problem in its large general significance, and lastly on the relation of the churches to socialism.

To turn to the first question. The other day a man said to me, in speaking of the relation of churches to the social question, "If they claim supernatural origin, and supernatural powers, hold them to the standard of supernatural results." That seems to me to strike at the heart of most of the criticism that has been made against the church and its shortcomings. The failure and the limitations of the church are tremendous when compared with their pretensions. A just sense of modesty might save their dignity as well as their injured pride. Even a sense of humor would help. In much of the discussion that one hears concerning the various and sundry crises that the churches are facing, one is reminded of nothing so much as a street scene on a September

¹ This manuscript has no explicit date. However, it can be dated by its clear connection with several other manuscripts that cover similar ground, which themselves can be dated. In the second paragraph here Earl Davis quotes a man, "If they claim supernatural origin,...;" this same quote is found at the opening of his manuscript "Churches for Truth and Justice," which can clearly be dated to 1910.

evening when some vender of choice wares, under 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 marketplace the moral influences most needed there; that it equips the court with principles of justice without which human society would dissolve; 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 friend or foe. To make the church positively and aggressively responsible for the chief motives, ideals, restraints, and discipline of life in the social order today is really too much. Up to this point the most brutal criticisms have condemned the church more for neglect of duty and cringing subserviency than for deliberate and constructive effort in producing the values that obtain in society today. But this passage above quoted asserts that the church should be supported because it has done and is doing and will do the providing of these life values. But that is the very point at issue. If the church makes the claims as above indicated, it is open to severe criticism either for not delivering the values it claims to deliver, or for delivering false values. In either case, it is open to the charge of obtaining support under false pretenses. If the church presumes to be responsible for all the good in the social order, it must either accept the responsibility for some of the glaring evils, or be more modest in its claims. Here is the pith of all the criticism against the church. It is the unwarranted pretensions of the church that exasperate and disgust one, and call forth

² This quote is from an editorial in *Unity: Official Organ of the Congress of Religion*, Volume LXIV, Number 25, February 17, 1910, p. 810. With minor changes, this quote can also be found in Joseph Henry Crooker (1850-1931), *The Church of Tomorrow*, Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1911, p. 231.

the stinging rebuke. It would [be] wholesome to hear the churches say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." At any rate the assumption that The Church or churches have 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 standards sizes for 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 The place and the value of the church in the social economy is determined, not by its origin, but by its purpose; not by its history, but by its moral and spiritual dynamic today.

The church is one of the institutions of society. It is at once a monument to the human ideals and life values of the past, and a channel for the satisfaction of a human need, and the rendering of a service to humanity. As such, it shares in the limitations and imperfections of society as a whole. It is not and never has been a complete entity in itself, in the world, but not of the world, apart from other institutions, and able to produce at will the eternal values, and to train the whole force of its organized strength upon a given problem. For the most part the same people who make up the social order as a whole, constitute the following of the church. The ideals of the one, both good and bad, are reflected in the other. 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 expression of and the medium of expressing a common purpose and a common

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 an 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 Religious Magazine*, Vol. XXII, No. 5, November 1884, 392-400, this quote, p. 398.

effort. It is gratuitous to speak of the attitude of the church towards this or that debated problem. It has not [a] united attitude any more than society as a whole as a united attitude. Particular churches may have an attitude in regard to any given problem. This attitude will be determined by the attitude of the people who make up the church, and give to it its character. The mental, moral, and economic status and development of the people of the church will determine the attitude of a given church towards a given problem. When a new and divisive issue appears, some churches will have one point of view, and others will have another, while still others will be divided in or by their opinions. This is illustrated again and again in history.

Let me repeat the points that I have in mind in this part of my paper. First, pretensions in churches and in the Church are as disgusting and reprehensible as in individuals. Second, the Church, as an organized entity in the world, but not of the world, is a phantom. Third, the efficiency and the worth of the church is measured by its living dynamic, and its attitude towards questions of various types depends upon the intellectual, moral, and economic interests of its people.

Second Section.

Every generation has its own social and economic problems to face. We are forever in the midst of undiscovered lands. The great function of life is to explore, or perhaps better, to live the original spontaneous life, revealing and bearing witness to the living spirit of the living God.

The unworthy idea, that this life at best is but a vale of tears, mean, sordid, depraved, a necessary evil, to be condemned and endured for the sake of the hereafter, is fast disappearing from our midst. The more are we coming to see that eternal, immortal, sacred life is just this life here. So, not only as a matter of the necessity of environment, but also as a necessary result of a changed and changing conception of life itself, we are coming to face more squarely and openly the question of the facts and conditions of life here. As for myself, I never think of the life after death either for myself or my friends. This is the life that I am living. I am anxious that every man should have the full measure of life's possibilities here and now. To me, the great end and aim of all our human activities is [to] live this life and to enable others to live this life as if they

were immortal gods, and not as if they were slaves of Mammon or servants of Croesus. So, we are and must be interested in all problems, either for or against them. In the face of these problems there is bound to be a diversity of opinions, and, as I said, these opinions are determined by the general development of the various groups. In the midst of the possibilities of life, there can be no infallible guide. We [have] a clean, clear purpose, without side-stepping, or compromising principles; we do our work and face our problems. In this work, our integrity as individuals and churches is determined by the absolute sincerity and fidelity of our motives and activity. The efficiency of our activity may depend upon our wisdom and sagacity: Only the unwritten pages of history yet unborn can determine that. This is the first point that I wish to make. The motive is absolute; the wisdom and sagacity are conditioned. Let no man violate the motive in himself, or question it in another.

The social unrest of our time, both political and industrial, as well as in the world of religious interests, is the witness to a profound revolution that is going on in our midst. The old order changeth, and the modern world is working towards a new social ideal, with all its implied changes in the institutions of society. The social ideal of the ancient world as expressed in Plato's classic book, *The Republic*, called for a social order embodying Justice. There was to be a ruling class of philosophers, whose duty it was to guide the state. Then there was a second class of soldiers, whose duty it was to guard the state, acting in obedience to the philosophers. Then came the working class whose duty it was to support and obey the two upper classes. This ideal of Plato's was more-or-less realized in the social order of the Holy Roman Empire, with the Church as the philosopher class, and the secular nobility as the warrior class, while the serfs were the obedient laborers that did the work and supported the rulers. Today we have many suggestions of the reality of Platonic Justice. The capitalists are the rulers, the intellectual class; while it is hard to determine just what the scope of the guarding class is. [Those of] the working class do the work, and the one great hope today rests in the fact that they are kicking and protesting, and by no means wish to expect to obey the commands of their masters.

Now, since the beginning of the Reformation, society has been trying to free itself from the grip of that ancient world ideal, and establish a social order in which the principle of democracy

shall find expression. Much has been done, and much remains to be done. The alleged authority of the Church has been transferred from the Papal Monarch to the people, it has been socialized. Truth, once regarded as a supernatural revelation from an outside source, is now seen to be the gleaning of human experience in the world life. The old ideal of the divine right of kings has given away in favor of the principle that the right to govern rests in the people. The ruler is no lord and master, but servant. The political right has been largely socialized. The same process has been applied to the question of revelation, and to our idea of God. God is no longer an absentee God, but the immanent, or socialized God. We are still in the midst of this process of transforming our social order from an aristocracy to a democracy. The problems of the most pressing character today are simply those in which the task of socializing an old world value is at stake. For example, in theology, the great question in most Christian fellowships, as it is in the one in which I am most familiar, is one of socializing our ideal of manhood. Is Jesus the revealing type of human perfection, or is he one of those who have striven after and made a contribution to our ideal of human life? Is the source of the ideal of human life in Jesus as Monarch, or is it in the common life of man? Is he lord and master of humanity, or is he a great servant who has done much 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 today, in whose service humanity is to sacrifice every value that conflicts with their greedy demands? The question is ethical. Are we to continue to have a social order in which the interests of wealth and profits shall be the monarch, and rule over us with an iron hand in all its nakedness, or with an iron hand covered by the silk glove of charity? The same principle is at stake today as 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 and to pay the bills. Today we are contending against the idea of the divine right of capitalism.

It is in fact our lord and master as the facts of current events demonstrate to the satisfaction of the most doubtful, and no one knows this fact better than those who hold the power. Also it is pitiably true that in gaining this power the system has grossly violated the principles of honesty and decency, so

that we are coming to see that the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is not so much the result of capacity and thrift as it is the result of dishonesty and theft.

In the midst of all this confusing turmoil of the social unrest, the one great light is the fact of a tremendous and revolutionary unrest and discontent. The unworthy lord and master does not maintain his control without protest. Uneasy rests the head that wears the crown. All over the country and the entire western world are the evidences of a great uprising against this unrighteous ruler. It is an irrepressible conflict between the rights of personality and the rights of wealth. Shall the industrial system be the servant of human life contributing to its growth and development, and to the emancipation of personality? Or shall it remain the lord and master to whose command we must submit and upon whose altar we must place our sacrifices of degradation, poverty, debauchery, corruption, and even life itself. Shall this structure of modern society, into whose building has gone the labor, the brains, the innumerable hours of toil and the great sufferings of millions of people, remain a prison filled with the filth and vermin of capitalism, or shall it become the abode and habitation of freedom and life? Is society to remain plutocratic or shall it become democratic? Shall wealth remain monarchical or shall it become socialized? That is the essence of the social question today.

Now towards this social question as a whole, what must be the attitude of churches? If churches really were what they pretend to be, there would be no question as to the attitude. Especially Christian churches, whose followers have read the sermon on the mount, must understand that men cannot worship God and Mammon. They must understand that fasting, prayer, the sabbath, the law even, the state, the church, and all the accidental paraphernalia of society, must be the servant of man and not its master. They must know that no institution is sacred, and that it has a place in society only as it serves the needs of men. They must realize that personality is supreme, not as a matter of intellectual speculation, but as a matter of effective and efficient reality. Churches, if they are true to the pretensions with which they present themselves before men, they must insist upon the supremacy of the human soul, and the principles of freedom, and justice, and life in the struggle of men against a life-destroying institution.

But the churches as a whole will do no such thing, for they are not what they pretend to be. Churches will do in the face of this problem, just what they have done in the face of every other problem. Some churches will meet the ethical challenge fairly and squarely. They will cast their lot in on the side of those who are fighting for freedom and the supremacy of personality, they will see that it does not profit a nation to gain a whole world of foreign trade, and industrial prosperity and commercial supremacy, but in so doing to lose its own soul of ethical integrity, decency. Such churches will be well to the front in all the hard work, the inspiring heroisms of bringing in the new dispensation. To them, it will [be] the very life of their being, not a thing to be feared, but a thing to be welcomed, it will be the coming of the son of man to his own. In such churches will be life, and faith, a hope, and the God spirit.

Other churches will hedge. They will talk about souls and justice, and freedom, but they will be safe and sane, looking out for all the privileges of the new order, but careful to avoid all obligations, and duties. They will hope to change their coat in the night, and follow along in the rear of the conflicting armies, praying upon each or both as the case may be. They will try to worship and to serve both God and Mammon. By and by, when the balances have tipped in favor of life and justice, these very same churches will be blowing about what we have done, and will claim the credit for it all. It has always been so, and it is so now. Men have only to read the record of the attitude of the churches towards the slavery question. To hear them talk, you would think that the churches were responsible for the abolition of slavery.

Then there will be churches that are and will be plain worshippers of Mammon. The character will be determined by their followers, not by their formal creed. The followers are and will continue to be worshippers of Mammon. These churches will be worshippers of Mammon; they cannot be anything else. They will oppose all the unrest and discontent of our times, they will use all the influence at their command to defeat the ends of justice and righteousness, and truth. They will crucify the men who are workers in the garden of truth. They will play the title role of the Pharisee to the heart's desire of the most exacting stage director of this world stage of ours. But verily, they will

receive their reward. The wages of sin is death, and they will pass away as the interests that they represent pass away. But indeed, these churches are more desirable than the wobbly ones. At least, they have convictions, and express their convictions in the open. If you are careful and observing, you can see how these churches are lining up on these questions just as I have indicated. It is perfectly natural for the medieval Catholic Church to take its stand for capital and authority, and to come out open in the fight against socialism.

This brings me to the last part of my paper. I cannot prove, or demonstrate to anyone the truth of the assertion that I am going to make. Those who wish to, will accept it, and those who do not, will deny it. The statement is this, that all the real vital moral and spiritual energy of our times is being directed towards this great social revolution that is going on in our midst this very day, and that the heart and soul of it all is the socialist movement. This thing is a matter of experience. I find that the experience of Jack London is true. In his little statement, "What Life Means to Me," he says,

I discovered that I was a socialist.

The socialists were revolutionists, inasmuch as they struggled to overthrow the society of the present, and out of the material to build a society of the future. I too, was a socialist and a revolutionist. I joined the groups of working-class and intellectual revolutionists, and for the first time came into intellectual living. ... Here I also found warm faith in the human, glowing idealism, sweetness of unselfishness, renunciation, and martyrdom—all the splendid, stinging things of the spirit. Here, life was clean, and noble and alive. Here, life rehabilitated itself, became wonderful and glorious; and I was glad to be alive. I was in touch with great souls who exalted flesh and spirit over dollars and cents, and to whom the thin wail of the starved slum child meant more than all the pomp and circumstances of commercial expansion and world empire. All about me were nobleness of purpose and heroism of effort, and my days and nights were sunshine and starshine, all fire and dew, with before my eyes, ever burning and blazing, the Holy Grail, Christ's own grail, the warm

human, long-suffering and maltreated, but to be rescued and saved at last.⁴

This expresses the ethical, and spiritual life and dynamic of the socialist movement. In those moments when you are discouraged over the lack of zest and enthusiasm in the churches, remember that the God spirit is not dead. It is working in the heart of this socialist movement. Whatever of life there may be in churches today is there because in them is developing the same interest and spirit that makes the socialist movement galvanic, that has made during the last 40 years over 9,000,000 voting adherents, and probably 40,000,000 adherents.

So much for its spirit, but what of its intellectual outfit, and its problem. That I want to state as briefly as possible.

In the face of this present conflict between labor and capital over the necessities of life, the socialist calls attention to the fact [that] the necessary prerequisite of human life and activity is the supply of clothes, shelter, and food. They point out that all the great movements of history have been struggles either directly or indirectly for the control of these necessities, for the class that controls these controls in a large way the destinies of all. This is called the materialistic conception of history, or economic determinism.

Now in our present capitalist society, the capitalist, because he owns the tools of production and distribution, has control over the necessities of life. During the process of years the capitalist class has paid to labor less than labor has earned. This surplus value it has confiscated, and practically robbed, 9/10 of the population of its property. The result is that society is divided into two antagonistic classes, struggling in actual warfare for their respective portions of the profits of industry. Thus, we have the organization of capital, on the one hand, and the laboring class, on the other. They are engaged in an irrepressible conflict. In the labor wars of the past and present, we see them lined up fighting over the distribution of profits. That is the significance of trades-union movement. But the conflict is being changed from conflict over the profits of

⁴ Jack London, *Revolution and Other Essays*, New York: Macmillan Company, "What Life Means to Me," pp. 291-309, this quotation from pp. 301-302. Jack London (1876-1916) was an American novelist, journalist and social activist.

production, to a conflict for the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution. You can read the record of the approaching intensity of this conflict in the political activity of the year. This is the class struggle. People dodge and hedge over it, but it is a fact. We are at this moment in the midst of a class warfare in this country.

It is a fight between those, who by means for the most part unscrupulous and inhuman, have gained control of the machines of production and distribution, and those who use those machines, but do not control them. It is a struggle between the capitalist class and the working class for the control and the ownership of wealth which labor has produced. The socialist says that this conflict can be ended only as the one becomes the master of the situation. In other words, in that the very machines we have made for the benefit of humanity must be owned and used for the good of society as a whole instead of the exploitation of the man for the commercial advantage of the few. Those things which are socially used, must be socially owned, and controlled. In other words, in the use of the means of production and distribution, we must cooperate for the benefit of all, that all men and women may become economically free. This is the socialists' cooperative commonwealth.

In the work for this ideal, and in the establishing of the cooperative commonwealth, churches will take that attitude which their general character compels them to take. Some will be with the work, heart and soul, while others will be bitterly opposed. Some will be divided, and will be split. It is a divisive issue. It involves fundamental principles. It is ethical in its character, although political and economic in its form. It is part of the great revolutionary movement of modern life. The heart of the reconstruction of society, the mouthpiece of democracy, and the ethical impulse of humanity is in it.

Just one thing I want to say in closing. In discussing this thing, do not think that Socialism is communism, or anarchism. That only shows ignorance. Do not think that it is dividing up of property. Or do not think that it is trying to reform man and society by mechanical devices. The socialist, more than all others, realizes that the process is a long educational process. Do not think of the socialist as a bloody revolutionist. I am a revolutionary socialist. But that means that someday, as the socialist movement grows and develops, the scales will gradually

become more evenly balanced, until at length they hang even. Then they will tip in favor of the new order, and that will be the revolution. It is the natural process. A long slow preparation, and then a culmination. Nature does it, so does human nature. Revolution is the product of [an] evolutionary process. It registers what has been done.