

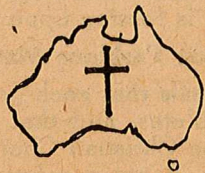
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THREEPENCE

Christian Insight on Society

By the Rev. E. J. DAVIDSON, B.A.

Towards a
Christian
Commonwealth



and a
Christian
World.

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My aim in this pamphlet is to draw attention to the necessity of proclaiming to our generation the adequacy of the Christian Gospel for man's social, political and economic needs; to suggest those main points in the economic structure where the purpose of God for society is most challenged; and, as far as I or any one can, to hint at the changes that must take place before a more Christian way of living is possible to man.

I would begin by saying that I possess no special skill either for analysing the economic structure of to-day or for drawing up the blue-prints of a new social order. Like all honest men and women I eschew the role of exact prophecy. But I cannot any longer remain blind — nor can any serious-minded Christian — to the implications of Biblical teaching about God, man and society. And I would be failing in my duty as a Christian teacher if I did not face up to the challenge which that teaching, together with man's dire need, is forcing upon us.

What Fashions Man?

History reveals that each generation has its own special problems, and that these constitute a challenge to the Christian Church to supply an adequate answer, if not a solution. Our generation finds itself confronted by a period of history in which the predominant problem is economic. It is in the realm of industry and politics, of production and consumption, of work and finance, rather than in the purely domestic realm

that Christians are asked to give light and guidance to a bewildered world. I do not suggest for one moment that this age is without its problems for the individual as an individual. They have existed and will exist so long as man is man. But we see them to-day, not as the problems of an isolated being, abstracted from his environment, but as the problems of personality set in the matrix of society. I will go so far as to say that we have not dealt adequately with individual problems, the problems of personal living, and never will be able adequately to deal with them, as long as we treat men and women as beings who live a life apart and isolated from their fellows. Mere individualism is false to man's nature and false to his need. We have been trying to think of and treat man as though all that he needed was a gospel addressed to his inner being. It is true that he needs such a gospel and finds it in Christianity. But we have been, on the whole, blind to the fact that his inner life is as much determined by these influences and pressures which come from outside him, from his environment, as by those forces that lie within him. Personality and outlook are the by-products not only of inherited tendencies but also of environmental factors.

We have recognised this fact in education, in the treatment of nervous and moral diseases; we have sought to give the growing child a general atmosphere—an environment that will counteract certain inherited tendencies—and we

are prepared to accept the same principle in our treatment of adult problems. It remains for us to apply whole-heartedly a similar therapeutic on a wider scale when dealing with man's social problems.

Widen the Range.

I suggest, that, in actual fact, we have accepted this principle in religion, though we have done so more or less unconsciously. Why is it that we pass so many resolutions at our synods and assemblies dealing with the necessity of altering the environment in which men struggle to be more Christian? Why is it that we hear such round and condemnatory attacks upon the liquor trade, upon gambling, debasing literature, and other recognised factors determining character, if it is not that we tacitly agree that such factors constitute part of the environment affecting man's spiritual welfare? Why not take the next logical step and apply this principle generally to all those forces and influences of our economic, social and political organisation which—no less than that the forces I have mentioned—determine the happiness and well-being of our fellows? I confess that I cannot understand why we have not been as inquisitive and as thorough-going in our investigation of the problems of housing, of town-planning, of unemployment, of monopolies, of money-control, as we have been in the investigation of some of

the problems I have named. If the answer is because we have been afraid, then let us admit the fault and correct it at once. If it is because we have believed ourselves unequipped with the necessary knowledge and technique for such investigation, then let us admit it and begin acquiring the knowledge and seeking to understand the technique. But I do not think we are at heart either fearful or unable to acquire the knowledge necessary for such investigation. Rather would I like to think that we have not yet awakened to the truth of man's complex nature and of the Gospel's adequacy to his need. **Our greatest need surely is to make conscious a principle hitherto unconsciously accepted, and place all the problems of man in society upon a basis where we see them as relevant to human welfare.**

Here, then, is our starting point: the Christian is concerned with all life, the life of inner piety and the life of social being. He sees man, as God sees him, not merely as an individual but as a being struggling to achieve personality in a sea of complex and bewildering currents that swing him this way and that. It is the recognition of this fact which supplies the clue to the kind of Christian emphasis needed to-day. **It sets us our main task: that of discovering at what points in the structure of our social and economic life the purposes of God for man are most challenged.**

Let me indicate, briefly, in what direction we should look for these points of challenge.

Acquisitiveness.

The first concerns the ordering of our economic life in ways calculated to **enhance acquisitiveness**. I doubt if any one will seriously question the statement that the getting of wealth, the acquiring of property, the accumulating of "things," is the chief criterion of success in our world; and that this mood is clean contrary to the explicit teaching of the Old and the New Testaments. Its prevalence in the days of the prophets is plain for all who read their writings; "Hear this ye kine of Bashan, that oppress the poor, that crush the needy. . . Ye trample upon the poor, and take exaction from him of wheat. . . ye that afflict the just and take a bribe, and that turn aside the needy in the gate from their right . . . they have sold the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; they that pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor." Could this language of Amos be stronger in condemning the spirit of unleashed covetousness on the part of those who want and take what they want? Micah describes the strong and crafty, crowding the peasant from his ancestral holdings, and the mother from her home, by the devices always used for such ends; exorbitant interests on loans, foreclosure in times of distress, "seeing the judge before the trial," and

hardness of heart towards broken life and undermined happiness. And Jesus, feeding his spirit on the prophetic literature of his race, warns and warns with patient persistence against the spirit of money-grubbing. Is it too much to ask that the new social order shall set bounds to this spirit of acquisitiveness by insisting that, as property is the chief source of this inordinate desire, property shall be thought of primarily in its relationship to the development of personality? If property rights constitute a source of communal trouble must we not set about seeing that such rights subserve the purposes of society? Here I can only indicate the problem and hint at its partial solution. Full well I know the complexity of that problem. Russia has striven to deal with it. Must we wait on a lead from Communism before we are driven by events to be Christian in our attitude towards that chief of all social diseases—acquisitiveness?

Classes.

Another point at which the purpose of God for man and society is challenged is to be found in the existence of **classes economically determined**. Jones is in one class because his only pull on the economic market is his capacity for work or his incapacity to secure work under a capitalistic democracy; Brown is in an entirely different stratum of society because he does not need to work or has sufficient material needs at his dis-

posal to make work unnecessary. In the eyes of God both are men; both possess the love of the heavenly Father; both should have opportunity of developing their own and their children's personalities to the fullest possible extent. Yet one knows servitude of a real kind; the other enjoys sufficient freedom to employ his leisure wisely and well if he will. A democracy that makes such divisions inevitable is no democracy; it is little short of slavery; and the slave, strangely enough, knows more of opportunity and security under a war economy than under a peace economy. So long as "economic pull" determines the possibilities of the development of personality have we really outgrown the ancient conceptions of slavery? At least some aspects of the old Hebrew code concerning slaves made it possible for the slave to be brought back into the bosom of the family and re-instated in his own rights as a person. We need once again to recall the noble words of Job:

"If I despise the cause of my manservant or of my maidservant, when they contend with me; what shall I do then when God riseth up? and when He visiteth me what shall I answer him? Did not He that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?"

Is not God rising up again? And what shall we who are content with a system which makes men less than free persons say in answer to him? The Biblical conception of man demands as its social counterpart a community of free and equal

persons and peoples where the artificially engendered classes shall cease to exist because the cause of class-conflict shall have been removed. Must we wait, as in Russia, on the sword to achieve what can (nay, for a free people must) be achieved by reformation?

Power.

A third point on which we should turn the searchlight of Christian criticism is the **existence of economic power unrelated to any organ of the community.** Here we touch the tenderest spot in the whole nervous structure of modern society — money and the power it exercises. I do not need to press the point that money is power and that, back and behind legislature, back and behind government, lies a power hard to reach, difficult to control. Every government knows this. Most people recognise it to-day. "Centres of economic power," as the Oxford Report reminds us, "have been formed which are not responsible to any organ of the community and which in practice constitute something in the nature of a tyranny over the lives of masses of men." It is awareness of this tyranny that eats as an acid into the lives and minds of countless people, making them bitter, discontented, bewildered. Such tyranny may conceivably issue in good to the community; it may not. But in principle, especially in Christian principle, such power is dangerous—

morally dangerous to those who exercise it, and dangerous to those who feel its tyranny. I may be wrong—the point, I know, is open to discussion—but here we reach the stronghold of the enemy of the spirit of a new humanity. Only a community which has freed itself from this power of money and manfully sought to bring it into the service of the community can hope for that measure of industrial peace and social welfare which a Christian conception of society demands.

Unemployment.

One other point at which God's purpose for society is challenged: it concerns **that sense of frustration, caused chiefly by unemployment.** We have known the ravages of unemployment but recently; we shall know them again unless we are prepared to meet a post-war world with a programme at once creative and revolutionary. For nothing breaks the spirit of man more than lack of significant activity. Mere doles, charitable reliefs, temporary expedients, will not suffice to save men or their society from debacle. The future, the literal future, of democracy turns on its capacity for giving men not merely work, but significant work, work that will make them feel that they are pulling their weight in society. Surely we may interpret the parable of the labourers in the Gospel to mean (among other things, of course) that society has a duty to

those who stand idle in the market place. For every one man who has been debased by his environment to the extent of losing all desire for work there are thousands who ask of society the right to share in its creative processes, to help build and maintain a social and economic structure that will give the highest measure of security and freedom. If there is one problem more than any other challenging God's purposes for society it is this problem of unemployment. God is a worker. He is the Creator. He delights to do things. So do most men. And to rob them of that right is to defeat the purpose of their creation and to take all purposiveness from them.

The upshot of all this, then, is that you and I cannot be satisfied with anything less than a full gospel, applied with dedicated thought and high courage to the totality of man's life. Individual problems and social problems are but different aspects of the same problem; man's spiritual and material welfare in a world where it is impossible to separate the material and the spiritual without doing despite to the God who called the one into being that it might serve as the vehicle of the other. Christian criticism of the form into which our present social structure is cast must go on, hand in hand with the promulgation of those Christian principles of social living implicit in the whole wide range of Biblical literature. Just what form a more Christian social order must take I cannot say. But

I believe it will combine a deeper sense of personal worth with an increasing regard for community needs. A wiser and more courageous generation, more remote than we are from the turmoil and bitterness of the years immediately coming after the last war, will probably effect a combination of the best in the democratic institutions with those now being worked out under the Russian Constitution. And if they do this, not only because of man's need but because of their profound belief in God's purposes for society, they will have achieved something better than this poor present shows.

IF the Christian Insight on Society is ever to
lead to

CHRISTIAN ACTION

in and upon Society, all who share the main
viewpoints of this pamphlet must

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