

JESUS AS A SOCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL REFORMER

By the Rev. Charles B. Mitchell

The attempt to fasten the authority of Jesus to every social, political and industrial reform is made in each generation. And it just as futile as would be an attempt on the part of any one to bind a griddle of exclusive ownership about the sun or atmosphere. Not that His attitude is one of indifference to any or to all of the real reforms that have ever been undertaken, but that He is greater than any specific movement for human betterment, or than all of them put together. The sum total of His influence, that is, His example, His work, His teaching, was the creation of a spirit among men that would make the removal of all wrongs possible and the establishment of justice sure.

He Aimed to Change Men.

He did not plant a particular tree, but He aimed to so change the soil and climate of the earth—the aspirations of men—that all the trees of the Lord might grow. This was His real mission and from this mission He must not be diverted. He was not in any sense, a partisan. I want to make this point absolutely clear. To use the words of Vedder, "the social reformer is always mainly concerned with institutions—Jesus was chiefly concerned with men. His mission was not to be a reformer, but a revealer—to make God known to men, and so to bring them into right relations with God, as a condition precedent to right relations with one another. He was not an agitator, but a prophet. He sought the betterment of society, indeed, but only through the spiritual uplifting of the individual man."

His Personal Attitude.

What was the personal attitude of Jesus to the social and political conditions of his own time? Let us make a first hand study of the records. First, what have these records to say about his attitude toward slavery, intemperance, class oppression and other evil conditions that we find in the society of that time? In His day, the worst forms of slavery were imposed upon human beings, under the dominion of Rome. He knew it. He realized the horror of it, the wickedness of it; but there is not one word on record that He ever hurled directly at that institution. One single sentence of three words—"Slavery is wrong," would have been of inestimable value to the anti-slavery leaders of the United States in their great struggle; but it could not be found. And yet it would be simply infamous to say that Jesus sanctioned slavery, or to believe that he did not hold it with all the intensity of a divine indignation.

Corruption in His Time

In His day, the officers of Rome were corrupt and despicable, the emperor himself a tyrant of oppression. Yet he launched no lightnings against a power that kept them in the dust. He discouraged violence and warned them that whoever took the sword should perish by it. Are we then to suppose that He looked complacently on the wheels of that huge machine which ground the life of his brethren. I do not think so. The system of taxation in His day beggared whole provinces; but He suggested no reform and paid the demanded tribute for Himself and His disciples. "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; unto God the things which are God's." That would have been the time to have anticipated the single tax or the inheritance tax or the income tax, but He did not.

Did Not Touch on Drunkenness.

There was drunkenness in His day, but Jesus was as far from directly prohibiting the traffic which caused it, that He incurred the reproach of being a winebibber and a glutton Himself. Must He therefore be quoted in favor of the gutter? A thousand times, "No."

These facts lie on the very surface of the Gospels. They are not to discourage modern reformers; or to turn them aside from their tasks, but they forbid us to classify Jesus in their ample and honorable company. Somehow we feel that He stands by Himself; that He is a reformer of a larger type and a nobler method. Second, what would He do if he was living upon the earth today? I do not know but I suppose very much the same things that He did when He first walked the earth.

He Kept Out of Politics

First, would He tell us for whom to vote? There were at least two political parties in His time: the Herodians, who favored the existing government and the Zealots, the patriotic party of the Jews, who wished to overthrow it. He belonged to neither and took no part in their quarrels and campaigns. His kingdom was above, a kingdom of righteousness, which He hoped to see come down to earth and enfold both Herodians and Zealots, a kingdom for which, unfortunately, neither of them cared. Would he side with the poor against the rich, or the rich against the poor?

Did He ever put Himself upon the side of any class or condition 1900 years ago? Did He not mingle with men, irrespective of what they had or in what circles they moved? But did He not say that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? Yes, but Jesus never disparages, or seems to disparage wealth except as He found it standing in the way of the development of the spiritual life. That was why He told the young ruler to sell all that he had.

Condemned Others Too.

And on the same grounds He would disparage anything else—the learning of the scribes and the pride of the Pharisees and the traditions and rites of the priests. There He included in the same condemnation. Certainly He found in His day some rich men who went through the needle's eye—as Zacchaeus and Simon, the Pharisee, and Joseph of Arimathea. This demon-

strated that "with God all things are possible."

Condemned Also the Poor

Upon the other hand, Jesus one day turned upon a great crowd of the common people, or poor people, who were said to have heard Him gladly and plainly told them, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves and were filled." That was the extent of their interest in Him. Another time He added, speaking to people, many of whom did not know where the next meal was coming from, or where they were going to sleep that night, "Work not for the meat which perisheth, but for the meat which abideth unto eternal life."

This is the complete plan of Jesus. Let us never forget that He does not stand for classes but for qualities.

He Refused to Settle Disputes

In an industrial strife in our own country two parties are arrayed against each other. Here are the employees on the one. What would Jesus do or advise. We cannot imagine that He would be indifferent; but we cannot be so sure that He would take hold of the dispute directly to try to settle it. There was a case once in which His interest was solicited. "Master," said a young man to Him one day, "speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me." There was a man who felt that he had been defrauded, that he had been cheated out of his dues by an over-reaching brother. Jesus did not deny the truthfulness of his assertion, nor the justice of his claims. It seems a pretty fair case. One rather expects that Jesus will interfere. Certainly we should not be surprised if He had done so. But He did not. He refuses to be a judge or a divider. He will not settle the dispute.

Warned of Covetousness

He turns to the gathered and expectant company and says, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Would any modern reformer have handled the dispute in that way?

Out of the grasping and prejudice on both sides of the controversy. Both sides are wrong. The one has more than his share, and the other wanted more than his due. Both thought that a man's life consisted in the abundance of the things he possessed. Both needed to know that life meant more than possessions. That was all that Jesus had to say about it.

But the lesson remains. That truth needs to be preached to all men—and from the head of the firm to the humblest drayman. Employer and employee alike need that gospel. He searches and cleanses the heart. But He is not a judge of industrial disputes or a divider of property.

His Great Ideal

The object of Jesus was expressed in the prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In His thought God would reign at last in the hearts of the people and when He sat enthroned in all hearts, justice would be done and wrong would perish.

This was His great ideal—God enthroned. How many modern reformers who talk about the kingdom of God, have this conception and this ideal? They want the kingdom, but they want it upon some plan or scheme of their own. They want the kingdom, but they want it without God, on whose life, power, holiness, justice and love, that kingdom must be built.

Methods of Jesus Were Indirect

I think we can now begin to see why Jesus in His own person did not attack specific wrongs. He did not say, "Down with slavery." But He said, "The slave is a child of God," and He waited a seed into the cement of that institution that in its growth, loosened and overthrew the massive masonry. That principle, the worth of man, will lay in ruins at last every structure of injustice and oppression in the realms of government industry. It was better to give a great principle and trust men to find specific applications. So, it was no lack of sympathy with the poor that made Jesus decline the role of reformer. His method does not imply denial of social wrongs, or minimize their importance. It merely places first things first, God and the human heart—God in the human heart. His method was one of indirection, but all the more effective. It dealt with the roots and the soil—trusting the fructage.

Platform for the Future

Another principle that enters into Christ's ideal of the kingdom is the brotherhood of man. I. This principle lays a basis for conciliation in all disputes between men and nations. "All things, therefore, what sooner ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." That will be the platform of the future, if the days of peace which shall come to stay.

II. It lays the obligation upon the strong to do nothing by which one's brother stumbleth or is offended, or is made weak. Set the example at the top. There is selfishness and greed at the bottom. There are no selfishness and greed higher up? There are violations of the law among the poor and ignorant; are there none among the prosperous and intelligent?

III. The third principle of brotherhood says to all men: "Find in your occupation your opportunity to serve the world." It says to men of business: "These vast affairs which you administer are not to be used for your aggrandizement. Through them you are to serve the men who work for you and also your community." It says to the humblest toiler: "Your tools are the instruments by which, in every honest stroke of work you may help humanity onward." This is the higher view of

one's work that the doctrine of brotherhood demands. These are the deeper principles. Wider relationship with Jesus would recognize in the end a trial world.

His Principles Applied

All this is not to disparage the reformer, who seeks to promote some special end.

It may be a good thing which he desires. He ought to expect and to receive help and encouragement from the Great Reformer behind the reformers. But these things must be remembered.

I. No reform can be permanent that is not based upon moral principles. This is why Jesus insisted everywhere, among high and low, rich and poor, "Seek ye everywhere the kingdom of God." A man looks upon an enterprise and asks, "How much can I make out of it?" This is a perfectly legitimate question. He seeks for workmen to take hold of it. The questions they ask are: "How much wages will you pay? How many hours per day must I labor and under what conditions?" These questions are perfectly legitimate. Now if you seek the advice of Jesus as to whether you shall embark upon the enterprise, or whether you shall undertake the labor, the question He would regard as supreme is what will be the effect upon your character. Will you be a better man?

The Cry for Progress.

II. Principles are eternal, forms are transient.

No specific form of society is necessary for the realization of these great principles of Christ.

They may be practiced under all forms of government. They may prevail under a monarchy or republic. No specific organization is necessary. They may vitalize the present regime as well as they could a reign of socialism or the single tax, or profit sharing, or industrial partnership, or state or municipal ownership. Each person or group may arrange forms and details. If there be the "one spirit," there may be diversities of administration.

The Cry for Prayers

Nothing is more pathetic, nothing more insupportable, than the disappointments of history. About the middle of the last century the cry, especially in the old world, was for the enlargement of the suffrage for manhood suffrage. That, its advocates said, was all that was necessary for the millennium.

The suffrage has been extended everywhere, as it was right that it should be, but the millennium has not come. It hides among the shadows of the future. So in this country, reformers looked for the kingdom of God when slavery should be abolished. Slavery was abolished as it ought to have been, but neither among the race emancipated, nor among the race emancipating is the kingdom of God established. Something is lacking. So, if any new scheme of society should go into effect—such as socialism, its most ardent supporters would be disappointed.

The kingdom does not depend upon the outward; it depends upon righteousness. The evils of society are not primarily in the organization, so that if the organization here changed the evils would disappear. They go deeper than that. Society will never be better than the individuals who compose it. A sound ship can never be made of rotten timber, any more than a house can be built upon the sands. Individual reform must precede, accompanying a complete all social reconstruction.

The difference between Jesus and other reformers is this: They cultivated single plants. He fertilizes the entire bed.

Jesus holds that there is something the merchants need more than his profits and that is the spirit of God. Something the workman needs more than his wages, and that is the spirit of God. What both need and all need to know is that we are the children of one Father—that we are brothers on the earth—that we have a common destiny. We are made to know God; we are made to love each other. All are made to live on after the noise of the market place is hushed—after the factory has crumbled. And brethren, I believe the pulpit is to take up the proclamation of the kingdom of God and carry on the unfinished work of the Great Master. No principle is so lofty, that it may not be made to work upon the earth. No task is so lowly that it may not be lifted to the skies.

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