

The Gospel and Labour.¹

AT a recent Conference of Evangelical clergy the question was asked, more in the spirit of criticism than inquiry, "What as a party have we done, what, as a party, are we doing in the cause of social reform?" and for reply it was pointed out that the number of leaders who show any sort of interest in social questions can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The oft-repeated excuse, "It is not our business" was shown to be inadmissible, for the older Evangelicals—the men of Lord Shaftesbury's day—did not take that view; they were leaders in social reform and their zeal for the amelioration of the hard lot of crushed humanity in no way diminished the ardour with which they defended the Protestant and Evangelical position in the Church of England.

It is to be feared that that indictment is true of some of the clergy; and although one is profoundly thankful for the stirring call to them to show sympathy with the Labour Movement, uttered by the Bishop of Chelmsford at the Islington Clerical Meeting on January 15, it must be admitted that numbers of Evangelical clergy have much to "make good" before it can be said that their attitude to the cause of social reform is what it ought to be and what the profession of their principles demands.

Are Evangelical laymen any more favourably disposed towards it? I fear we are not, but the fact that the general subject set down for our consideration to-day is that of "Responsibility for Evangelization in Social and Educational Reform" may be taken as an indication that we intend to mend our ways.

The title of the subject assigned to me, "The Gospel and Labour" resembles that of a booklet *The Gospel of Labour*² containing the addresses given by seven Labour Members of Parliament during Labour Week in 1912; but although the resemblance is close, there is a vital difference between the two. "The Gospel" of which *we* speak is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we fee that to use the phrase in any other connexion is a misappropriation of the term, and leads to a misunderstanding which may have

¹ A Paper read at the London Meeting of Lay Churchmen held on Saturday, January 19, 1918.

² *The Gospel of Labour*. W. A. Hammond, Holborn Hall, 6d. net.

grievous results. When we speak of the Gospel *and* Labour, our desire is to show that the principles of the Gospel must be applied to the consideration of Labour questions as indeed to every other department of human life. But apart from the difference in phraseology, one is bound to recognize with the utmost thankfulness the truly Christian tone which marked several of the addresses of these Labour leaders; and a careful reading of that pamphlet will bring to many an entirely new conception of the principles which animate the Labour Movement.

The importance of our subject is beyond all question. By common consent "Labour," and all that is included in that comprehensive term, will furnish one of the chief, probably the chief, of the after-war problems. No one can say with any degree of accuracy what conditions will arise when the men come home, but it is practically certain that the old order of things has passed away and will never return. Let us be quite clear in our minds as to what it is that Labour wants. "The unrest in the industrial world to-day," says a Chaplain at the Front, writing in that most interesting volume just published, *The Church in the Furnace*, "has not its roots *solely* in poverty and want. There is something deeper still at work. The wage-earners are filled with a vague but profound sentiment that the industrial system, as it is now, denies to them the liberties, opportunities and responsibilities of free men. The heart of the difficulty is not wages or hours of work, but the general status of labour, its insecurity, and its lack of freedom in the ordering of its own life. Labour feels itself to be always oppressed and on the defensive, and it desires to 'secure the initiative' and thereby gain freedom of action and possibility of unrestricted growth and development. The demand of labour is a demand to be put upon a higher level, a level which is not of necessity selfish, but where the opportunity for self-devotion really begins. Labour has never conceived of itself as engaged simply in a struggle for ascendancy and for the material fruits which ascendancy would bring with it; its aim is to remove what denies and does violence to humanity." Such is the position as described by a sympathetic writer; more and more it is coming to be recognized that these demands are just, and cannot rightly be resisted by those who have regard for the dictates of our common humanity, and still less by those who accept the principles of the Gospel as their rule of life.

What then is to be our attitude as Evangelical Churchmen towards these aspirations of Labour? Are we to be indifferent? Are we to view them in a spirit of suspicion and mistrust? or Are we to prove ourselves ready to give them generous consideration? Are we to offer them our warm-hearted sympathy and active support? For myself I have no doubt what our answer ought to be, and I hope that this meeting of Evangelical Lay Churchmen, of men who believe that the principles of the Evangel are intended to meet and to satisfy the deepest needs of humanity, will agree that we shall make a profound blunder—nay more, that we shall be false to our profession—if we do not interest ourselves, intelligently, sympathetically, and prayerfully, in this great movement, and endeavour to make towards it our own special contribution of sacrifice and service. That we have a special contribution to offer there is no doubt at all. The great danger ahead of us is that the aspirations of Labour should become wholly materialistic—a danger, let me add, which seems gravely to threaten some other departments of social life quite as much as the Labour Movement—and unless we enter into the struggle and seek to bring to bear upon it the eternal claims of the Gospel the last state of the labouring classes of the country will assuredly be worse than the first. It is not every Labour leader who concludes his address, as Mr. Arthur Henderson concluded his during Labour Week, by insisting that Christ is not merely a Reformer but a Saviour—“your Saviour” were his words—or by exhorting the men to put first things first and “to take this Christ” (again I quote his own words) “into your own life as your Guide, as your Strength, as your Hope, as your Friend.” It is not every Labour address that contains this glorious and uplifting truth, although we may well be thankful that during Labour Week no fewer than twenty Labour Members of Parliament signed a Declaration that “Jesus said, ‘If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.’ Meaning so to follow Him, I wish to be enrolled in the Fellowship of Followers.” We need never despair of a movement that has such men among its leaders—would to God there were more of them animated by the same spirit—and the very fact that there is this religious feeling among some of the leaders, is a call to us so to co-operate with them that the deeper things shall have the pre-eminence not only among Labour leaders, but also among the

toiling masses of our country. We—you and I—must see to it that the future is not captured by the materialist or the secularist, but that the influence of the Gospel message shall be brought so to bear upon the Labour Movement as to purify its motives, ennoble its aims and enrich its purpose ; and also that the claim of the Gospel upon individual hearts and lives shall be so presented that men and women, recognizing its beauty, its joy and its power, shall yield themselves to our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be under no delusion upon this point. The great need of our country is Christ. The one and only hope of our country is Christ. We may improve the conditions of labour ; we may change the environment of the poor ; but unless and until the heart is converted—and I use the word in the old-fashioned Evangelical sense all too uncommon among us in the present day—we do not get very far along the road towards the realization of the greatest ideals in life.

It is absolutely fundamental to our position that we should recognize that fact. We so often hear Labour questions discussed, even by religious people, without due regard to the essential principles of the Gospel. We are told that we must acknowledge the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Of course we must ; no one, certainly no Christian, would dispute the truth of that dictum ; but it is not the whole truth, or the whole of *the* Truth. It leaves out of reckoning the most essential link in the chain—the relation of sonship. There is a sense, no doubt, in which it may be said that the fact of sonship is universal, and follows as a corollary upon the acknowledgment of the Fatherhood of God ; but we shall lose the grandeur of our high calling if we so rest our claim. We must go deeper. What is the source of true sonship ? “ As many as received Him,” that is our Lord Jesus Christ, “ to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name ” ; and it is the realization, as a matter of personal experience, of this great truth that brings out in all its blessed fullness the essential manifestation of God as “ Our Father,” and establishes the true brotherhood of man. If, therefore, we are to fulfil our part in the Labour Movement, we must never cease to insist that it is in the personal receiving of Christ and through faith in His Name that alone can be readjusted aright the various relationships of our common life. But this high and holy privilege to which we are called—that of becoming sons of God—places upon

us a tremendous responsibility. If we realize our position as sons of the Most High, we can never be indifferent to the welfare—even the material welfare—of any of His creatures. We must see to it, as far as within us lies, not merely that justice is done between man and man, but that the spirit of love and truth and fellowship prevails. Have we fulfilled our responsibility in this respect in the past? Are we fulfilling it to-day? What is required of us, in particular, in relation to this question of Labour?

First we must approach it in a *new spirit*. Party prejudices die hard and long-established convictions are difficult to overcome, and certainly there have been features in the Labour Movement which have done much to shake public confidence and to alienate public sympathy. Even during this time of grave national crisis the weapon of the strike has been used, and stoppage of work threatened unless certain demands were complied with. These things are perplexing; they are disheartening; but they must not turn us aside from the duty which belongs to us, and that duty, I venture to submit, is to regard with the utmost consideration the endeavours of men who, struggling long against adverse conditions, are now desirous of finding themselves, and of securing for labour some more adequate share in the fruits of toil. Whatever may be the rights and the wrongs of labour disputes—into which it is not within the province of this paper to enter—few who live and work among the labouring classes—and especially those of the unskilled order—will venture to deny that there is often an appalling disproportion (speaking, of course, of pre-war conditions) between work and wages, with the result that thousands upon thousands of our fellow creatures have found it a most difficult matter to maintain even a bare existence for themselves and their families. And side by side with their poverty we see—and they see—evidence not merely of wealth, but of shameless extravagance and vulgar luxury flaunting itself before them on almost every side. Is it any wonder that the iron enters into their soul, that they are filled with discontent and that they readily fall victims to the tongue of the first agitator who comes along? Many of them have lost hope; they are frankly indifferent, if not actually hostile to the claims of Christ, because so few, comparatively, of His professed followers have ever shown them or their cause any good. Too many of us have been more ready to dilate upon the shortcomings of these

our unfortunate brethren than to help them to a better way of life ; we have been too eager to listen to tales of their improvidence, their degradation, and their dissoluteness ; forgetting that for these things, even if they were all true, which may fairly be questioned, their shocking environment is largely responsible. If that has been *our* attitude, it must be changed. Henceforth let us approach all labour problems, and especially the problem of the unskilled—the most difficult of all—with a large heart and in a Christ-like spirit.

Second : we must bring to bear upon these questions *a new understanding*. It is not enough that we should be content, as so many of us have been, to rely upon what others tell us : we must examine the problems for ourselves in the light, not of the law of economics *only*, but of the obligations of Christian love. " I made it an invariable rule," said Lord Shaftesbury to his biographer, " to see everything with my own eyes, to take nothing on trust or hearsay. In factories, I examined the mills, the machinery, the homes, and saw the workers and their work in all its details. In collieries, I went down into the pits. In London, I went into lodging-houses and thieves' haunts, and every filthy place. It gave me a power I could not otherwise have had. I could speak of things of actual experience, and I used often to learn things from the poor sufferers themselves which were invaluable to me. I got to know their habits of thought and action, and their actual wants. I sat and had tea and talk with them hundreds of times." We cannot all do as Lord Shaftesbury did, but we can all seek to obtain first-hand information, and then to apply our faculties to an impartial examination of the evidence thus acquired. It may possibly lead us to revise our preconceived notions of labour conditions ; if so let us follow the lead of our conscience fearlessly, no matter what old ideas have to be scrapped. If we are to take any part, however humble, in the coming reconstruction of England we must have minds alert and keen to understand the nature and bearing of the questions at issue.

Third : we must be animated by *a new determination*. In some hazy, general sort of way we all have the will to do good, but the new conditions upon which we are entering will lay upon us a heavier responsibility than that. The times call for, and our Christian profession demands, a resolute determination to work

for the betterment of the labouring classes. In what directions our help will be most profitable must depend, to a large extent, upon our own local circumstances, but the way will not long be wanting when once the will to help is strongly established within us. It is the lack of determination that has been and still is the bane of so many professedly Christian men, with the result that the lead has in many cases passed into the hands of those who view the question from the material side only. The opportunity is with us here and now ; be it ours to determine that, in the fine words of William Blake,

We will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall our sword sleep in our hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

That brings me to my last point—we must be prepared to offer *a new service*. The old easy-going methods will not bear the strain of the new conditions, which call for the best that we have to offer of devotion, of fellowship, of sacrifice. No longer must we say or think that it is no business of ours how our working brethren fare. We must be ready to offer them, in our Master's Name, our ready and willing service. Do you think they will be indifferent to it? Far from it. It may be to them a new experience, but they will quickly respond when once they find that what we are out for is not to exploit them or their cause, but to help them to a more adequate recognition of the work of their hands and a nobler and more generous expansion of their every-day life. And the impelling motive of this work must be love for Him Who lived and moved among the people as one Who serveth.

The Gospel and Labour! A grand conjunction! Let us, as men acknowledging the claims of the Gospel upon our own lives, see to it that in a new spirit, with a new understanding, by a new determination and through a new service we commend that Gospel to Labour as offering the one and only hope for the permanent regeneration of all mankind.

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