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PRESENT RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS IN CIVIC, COMMERCIAL, AND INDUSTRIAL LIFE.¹

BY THE REV. A. A. BOXLEY, Vicar of All Saints', Leyton.

THE Bishop of Chelmsford in a recent pastoral letter wrote :—

"The Labour Party in this country is at the cross roads. Largely the instincts of that section of the community are spiritual and idealistic, but by their side is the growing power of a purely materialistic sentiment and, if this prevails, then indeed will England have been delivered in vain from the German power, for she will have fallen a victim to an even greater horror and a greater tyranny. It is ours to prevent this, but the call to the Church to arouse and fulfil her destiny as the Body of Christ is urgent, pressing and imperative. The old England is gone. The new England is unbuilt. Men everywhere are saying 'let us rise and build.'"

That, I take it, expresses the object of this Conference. Suggestions as to what plan should be adopted are many and varied. It is for us, first of all, to get an insight into the true condition of things. Not until we get a vision, not only a view, of what really is, shall we be able to see what the need is and find out whether anything we possess will meet that need and assure a more satisfactory future.

That unrest would prevail after the war was a conviction with every thinking man. Previous to 1914 there was not a single Christian worthy of his name who did not blush with shame at the conditions, both social and industrial, that prevailed, and yet we stood by as in a nightmare, too paralysed to move a hand to avert the inevitable. Paralysis is not too strong a term to use in connection with the Church's attitude towards the glaring injustice and moral conditions, or immoral conditions, under which men, women and children were forced to exist.

But the war came, and how did it find our nation? Advanced? Progressing? Educated? As compared with a hundred years ago, yes, but when looked at in the light of the elevating and purifying power claimed for Christianity, decades behind-hand. This applies to each of the three departments of our national life which we have under discussion this morning. To get a vision of the religious life of each of these great factors in our national life, we must retrace our steps a bit. We must not judge either department by the

¹ A paper read at a C.P.A.S. Conference.

immediate happenings, for the strikes, the profiteering, the commercial juggleries and the red-tapism of civic bodies to-day are but effects of certain causes. There is to-day much *license* but very little real *liberty*, and liberty and freedom are among the birthrights of man.

CIVIC LIFE.

If we take the civic life of our cities and towns we find it is generally accepted that the members of the administrative bodies are men of ability, hardworking, patriotic, and with a preponderance of Christian characteristics, yet when it comes to voting on questions, if ever such questions are raised, which involve the application of Christ's plain teaching, such as the relationship of picture palaces, amusements, trading, etc., to Sabbath observance, there is no power of conviction in a protest, even if it is made. What does this mean? Of course, we recognize that these men are representatives of a community, hold their office by the pledges they make to their electors, and probably, for this very reason, administer and advise not as individuals but as representatives who feel that they cannot wisely go beyond the wishes of the people, or administer up to the standard of their personal convictions. It is argued by the vast majority of people that there is nothing harmful in the amusements provided to-day. Strict censorship is already being exercised, but while there is undoubtedly a proportion of truth here, it cannot but be acknowledged by the earnest Christian that the influence of much that is produced is not conducive to the best development of character. How is it that we see so few films of educative value advertised? An attempt has been made by cinema proprietors to include them in their programmes, but so far as I know with little success, or success as it is measured by proprietors, viz., packed halls. This, apart from the Sunday programmes. What is behind all this? [Frankly, we have to confess that members of public bodies, cinema proprietors and even publicans are, on the whole, men of the best type, and even anxious to raise the ideals and do their work in such a way as will not hurt the consciences of Christian people, or merit for themselves anything but the title of Christian gentlemen. It was Ellen Terry who once said, "We hear much about the reform of the stage, but very little of the reform of the audience." Here, I think, is a suggestion. Take your municipal bodies. Let us picture the position before an

election of the members of that body—each candidate is a highly respected citizen and in most cases corresponds in character to what I have already said of them. As things are to-day these men must associate themselves with, and be in sympathy with, the demands of the public. The party spirit prevails. The would-be member must be a party man. Now where is the Christian Church (and by Church I mean the whole body of Christians) at times like these? Whoever heard of a body of Churchmen running a campaign irrespective of any party question, in which they have fearlessly advocated a return to the poll of members who will interpret Christian conscience into administrative reform? “Good is enemy to the best.” We get good men in and they do good work, but why can’t they do what we believe to be the *best* work? Is it not because they do not feel there is sufficient backing by the *best* in people? The pulpit should be the place of leadership of thought as to what is required by Jesus Christ in a district and what every true follower should work for. Public opinion is the greatest force of the age. It is the very corner-stone of democracy. If there are defects in our civic life, and there are, the source of these defects are to be found in a defective people. To remedy them we must get back to the source, train the consciences of the people to harmonize with their avowed profession of Jesus Christ and foster such a spirit of co-operation and enterprise for righteousness and manly piety that they will be ready to act upon the promised power of God, and prove that “this is the victory that overcometh, even our Faith.”

COMMERCIAL LIFE.

Of the commercial life in the country it is obvious that without expert knowledge and practical experience it is not possible to do more than to give impressions. They may be open to criticism, but from the religious point of view, it is plain to every man that there is an unhealthy onesidedness in most business dealings. It has ever been a temptation to men to gain at the expense of another man’s loss. The history of the Jews is punctuated from beginning to end with references to the usurer. Unjust balances, short measure, the gloating over an unequal bargain, are all evidences of the temptations peculiar to a nation’s commercial experience. What was true in the Old Testament days is unfortunately true to-day. We went to war against Germany to vindicate our honour because

the terms of our agreement were not complied with. Germany had signed, but with a reserve, and as soon as occasion demanded the exercise of that reserve, the contract was ignored, they sought their own ends, and had there not been sufficient force to wrest their ambitious desire the other signatories to that contract would have gone to the wall. Now look at the evidence we have had both in pre-war days and since, and do we not see the same lack of principle undermining the straightforward dealings of man with man? From the largest commercial enterprises to the smallest, the germs of this self-interest at the expense of another is patent. The very existence of anti-profiteering committees is evidence of it. At the bottom of all is *selfishness*—the very opposite to the fundamental principles of a prosperous human society. Such a condition will always prevail until there is a realization of the fact that all men are members of one family and we are all of equal value, mutually dependent on each other. One great impetus was needed previous to 1914 to break down increasing injustices and differences which threatened to divide the nation. That impetus was provided by the call to work and sacrifice for one great national aim, viz., to win the war. We have seen with pride how class distinction was almost entirely eliminated during the war, and each man, rich or poor, was ready to share the fortunes of his fellow-men. What brought this about was co-operation and self-sacrifice. Now all history teaches us that unless energetic co-operation and self-sacrifice receives a fresh impetus, not less potent than that of the war, the removal of stimulus will be followed by a dangerous slump. What is the impetus needed in the commercial world which is likely to succeed in bringing about fair-play and honourable business transaction? Protective legislation is being exercised at present, but it only muzzles the offender. What is needed is the awakening of men's consciences to a new sensibility of honour and chivalry. Mere negativism will never do more than intimidate the weak. It is the positive teaching of the grandeur of an unselfish spirit that must permeate our commercial dealings, not "how much can I get out of this deal?" but "how little can I manage with to allow for a fair profit?" Here, again, there is a call for men who will take the lead. By far the majority of the men who attend church, are commercial men. Here is the call to these Christian men for a readiness to sacrifice business tactics for the cross of Christian witness

in the commercial world. There are many material helps towards the attainment of this ideal such as that provided by public school education and "team" work of every description, but the point that affects the Christian Church, and through it the establishment of the laws of the Kingdom of God (every one of which is a positivism), is the practical appropriation of God's Word through Micah, "I will shew thee, O man, what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

INDUSTRIAL LIFE.

The position in the industrial life is one which most certainly claims careful consideration and immediate attention. In the past relationship between employer and employed has been grossly misunderstood. To refer to employees as *hands*, to treat them as mere cogwheels in the industrial machine, has done more to put the men's backs up than any question of wages or hours. To be looked upon as merely having a market value but no recognized rights as human beings is bitterly resented. So many and varied are the ramifications of the industrial question that one is compelled at the brief time at one's disposal to omit facts of a technical character. But there are burning questions to be faced by the Church in regard to this matter, if the Church is to vindicate her claims as a leader of the forces which oppose every form of evil. There is a great "Why?" being articulated just now. During the last century experts tell us that there was a hundred per cent. advance in the industrial conditions of our nation, yet in spite of this what still prevails? The tyranny of the few over many weak. Look at the utter inadequacy of wages paid to the toiling class. True the terrible sweating of ten years ago has been largely eliminated, but there are still millions of our people living, or rather existing under a mere pittance. There has been great advance in the improving of conditions in factories and mines. Who is to be thanked for this? Not the Church. Labour has fought its own battles and is daily growing more powerful. The Bishop of Chelmsford's words quoted at the beginning of this paper bear testimony to this fact, but it reveals that side by side with the spiritual and idealistic force in the movement there is growing a purely materialistic sentiment. Why has the Church left others to find out and apply remedies to these ills as if it were no part of Christian religion?

The question of the oppressed, underpaid, underfed and ill-housed has been allowed to pass untouched. We have been too content with ministering to the wounded in the social strife without valiantly attacking the enemy. What is the enemy? Surely it is the spirit which makes men use other persons as the instrument of their profit and pleasure. The welfare of the community should be supreme over the profit of the individual. Christianity teaches that all men are brothers, and should labour for the community because of the equal value of every individual soul. We have the reports of the Archbishop's Committee upon the industrial question, but experts like Sir G. B. Hunter tell us that there are many defects. One among others is this: it is asserted that the evils that we most deplore are caused by or are incurable under our social and industrial system. This is not so. It is evident that the machinery of industrial organization is all right. It is the right spirit that is wanted, and this is what the Church claims to possess—clear-sighted and unselfish co-operation. Those who are best qualified to interpret the needs of the industrial question are constantly emphasizing the fact that what is wanted is unselfish co-operation. Resentment, class hatred and suspicion must go both in employer and employed. Where does the Church come in? One fact is plain. Men see the superiority of Christianity, but they do not see in the Christian a genuine allegiance. Christianity ceases to involve any risk or to cost men any personal sacrifice. The moral level of Christianity has been lowered, and consequently its moral witness dimmed. Jesus Christ plainly taught that the Church would, until the complete establishment of the Kingdom of God, be comparatively small. She is "a city set on a hill," "Salt of the earth," "a little bit of leaven which would leaven the whole lump." Power belongeth unto God and He has promised to exercise that power through men. Here then is the duty of the Church. Among her own members there must be the witness of the very spirit which alone can guarantee happy industrial conditions. Personal redemption is needed for social salvation, and this redemption is only found in Jesus Christ. What a challenge to the Church of Christ! Our Lord made no mistake in His administrative policy for the Church. Fellowship with His body cannot be separated from the obligation of membership.