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Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

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CHRISTIAN ECONOMIC OBEDIENCE

THE relevance of the Gospel to the life of man becomes apparent as the church learns to address itself to the real problems of an age. There is always the danger that the terms of the problem will be confused by an obstinate habit of thinking in the categories of an earlier period and attempting to apply the insights which were derived from different circumstances. In the struggle over the meaning and authority of the Bible in the earlier years of this century an issue of supreme importance was presented to Christian thought; but all too frequently it was distorted through being stated in the wrong way, and men thus made what were in fact inadequate decisions. From the conditions of its life, the church has continually been involved in the assumptions and procedures of a given economic order, even when it has been most concerned with its distinctive task of evangelism. The wrong kind of other-worldliness which professes an indifference to political and economic issues is no doubt understandable, but does argue a disposition to accept things as they are without subjecting them to the searching investigation which the Gospel demands.

It has been the distinctive office of the Iona Community to impress upon churchmen of all traditions in these islands the necessity of preaching the whole Gospel to the whole man. Theologians and ordinary church members must wrestle with economic issues in this epoch, and there is no escape from this responsibility of total commitment to the law of Christ. In two recent issues of *The Coracle* Dr. George Macleod has written a prophetic word for the church of the middle of the twentieth century on the text, "The great issue of our now united world is economic." A survey of Old Testament history, the preaching of John Baptist and our Lord, and the practice of the primitive church leads the writer to the conclusion that the economic content of Christian obedience "is not press-ganged out of our contemporary panic but stems from the very nature of our faith". There should be a concrete Christian answer to the very concrete Communist challenge at its most influential and attractive point. The witness of the primitive church to the mutual economic dependence of the richer and poorer members of the fellowship was nearly silenced by the effects of the Constantinian revolution, which gave the church first a privileged and then an exclusive position in the society of the later Roman Empire, and its barbaric successors. But there has always been a significant minority of churchmen discontented with an anaemic spiritual witness, and resolved to find a way of total commitment which would evidently appear as an honest resolve to give definite content to Christian obedience. The motto of St. Francis, the greatest of them all, "to follow naked the naked Christ", elicited an astonishing amount of enthusiasm and support; but after his death, riches and honour

were heaped upon the Order until this total witness became silenced and forgotten. As Macleod points out, the chief result of this monastic witness to the total commitment which the Gospel demands was to quiet the minds of the generality, who on the strength of this vicarious witness "made hardly any such witness at all". As celibacy can never be the ideal of the majority other attempts have been made, particularly since the Reformation, by married groups and communities to give this total witness. The Cotswold Bruderhof and the Christian Community of Rudolf Steiner are two notable contemporary examples of such attempts, while the Iona Community itself has been trying to plot a way more relevant to the conditions of Christian Scotland.

The summons of the hour is for the whole church to make a resolute attempt to recover this total witness. It cannot any longer be left to token movements, and the first steps must be applicable to men and women who are obliged to live in the world as it is. The church is called to witness and struggle in the novel conditions of a post capitalist economic order for the Crown Rights of the Redeemer: for His rightful position at the centre as King of kings and Lord of lords, and not just at the periphery as Master of Marriages and President of Funerals. "We are in fact the only people who have an answer to authoritarian police state communism. It is spiritual community of bodies." It will not be enough to assert that the witness of total commitment is required from the whole church, without the inauguration of groups who are prepared in some measure to act without laying themselves open to the charge "of crankiness which would spoil all". The method is parallel to that adopted by missionary societies who must not budge from their insistence on the world mission as the responsibility of the whole church and yet must take active steps to discharge that responsibility. It is inevitable that the majority will be quite content to allow a minority to give this witness, so that the two-fold insistence must never be relaxed. Dr. Macleod proposes for the serious consideration of church groups a method which could enable their members to practice mutual economic dependence without the sense either "of patronising or being patronised". The substance of the proposal is that all Income Tax allowances (except the personal allowance), and amounts actually paid in tax and for rent, should be deducted from annual income and that five per cent of the remainder should be regarded as the Economic Commitment for this purpose. It is a workable project under modern conditions and would give an impressive example of the range of Christian witness in the modern world. If it is rejected, then the obligation rests on those who reject it to show to the church a more excellent way.

THE JUDGMENT OF SCRIPTURE

THE Bible is an integral part of the common heritage of all Christian traditions. Its authority is invoked in the formulation of Christian doctrine and in the task of Christian proclamation. It is extensively used in every form of Christian worship and nourishes the devotional life of millions of simple Christians of every colour, race and tongue. The Christian Church has always regarded it not merely as a unique

and authoritative record of the history of its own origin and constitution, but as a means of grace through which the church is still able to hear the Word of the Lord. There is a biblical Christianity which has been reproduced in the lives of the saints in the succeeding generations of Christian history, from every type of cultural background and from every part of the world. Paul, Augustine, Bede, Francis, Luther, Wesley and Livingstone all bear a certain family likeness which has its roots in the testimony of the Bible.

Nevertheless the possession of a common Bible, has not delivered the Christian community from the scandal of disunity and it is apparent that divergent methods of interpretation, which themselves spring from different estimates of the meaning of biblical authority, are both cause and consequence of this disunity. The World Council of Churches in the period of its pre-history had discovered that the possession of the Bible could keep churches apart, as well as serve to bring them together. The problems of the relationship of the church to the Word of God in the Bible, and of finding an authoritative foundation for contemporary Christian teaching on the political and social order, were carefully debated for some years before the Amsterdam meeting in 1948. But it was evident that behind the conflicting witness of different Christian traditions was a sharp division of opinion on methods of biblical interpretation. No real progress could be made in the wider fields of Christian activity unless some greater measure of agreement could be discovered on basic principles of interpretation. One of the groups formed by the Study Committee of the World Council which met in Oxford in the Summer of 1949 was asked to study this vital question, under the chairmanship of Canon Alan Richardson, and was able to publish a statement on "guiding principles for the interpretation of the Bible" which commanded the general assent of all the members, drawn from eight countries and ten different denominations.

The document was published in *The Ecumenical Review** and deserves the most careful scrutiny on every hand. It is often asserted that the long and painful development of biblical criticism has brought untold enrichment to the understanding of the Bible which a modern Christian can possess. It is true that the ordinary reader now has access to an almost bewildering variety of books which offer to guide him in his study of the Bible and certainly provide him with a wealth of information about the historical setting of the Biblical text. Yet for the most part churchmen are puzzled and ill at ease about the Bible. Its pre-critical authority has not yet been replaced by a conception of authority which gives full weight to the contribution of scientific criticism, and also presents it to the reader as the Word of God, which he must hear and obey. History cannot be rolled back and the extravagances and failures of criticism cannot be made the occasion for any attempt to revert to the pre-critical era.

The document in question was based upon discussion of a particular passage, Jeremiah vii. 1-15, and it sets forth both the theological presuppositions of biblical interpretation, and the procedure to be followed in the interpretation of a specific passage. This discipline is an essential preliminary to the determination of the biblical teaching

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on a political, moral or social issue and its application to the circumstances of the modern world. Every preacher and Sunday School teacher is engaged on this task of interpretation, and it is important that the presuppositions and methods involved should be subjected to a very careful examination. It is for lack of this kind of self-knowledge that churches as well as individual Christians often misunderstand one another, because they are talking at cross-purposes. One sentence in the statement illuminates this problem from a familiar angle: "In examining a particular modern problem we should begin with the New Testament teaching. In the light of this we should consider the Old Testament evidence as well, in order to view the problem in the light of God's total revelation. In following the procedure, historical differences in the various parts of Scripture must not be overlooked . . . care should be used to see the correct proportions, so that too much emphasis may not be placed on a single passage, and the correct biblical perspective be lost." Such a careful use of scripture should go far to correct the influence—frequently very profound because unexamined—of political, social, cultural, or racial presuppositions.

MEDICINE AND THE GOSPEL

THE conception of the Christian frontier ably pioneered by J. H. Oldham, may prove to be one of the most important ideas in the development of a Christian strategy adapted to the conditions of a technical civilization, possessed of an intricate and complicated structure. It summons Christian men, conscious of their vocation to obey Christ in all things, to become frontiersmen and pioneer new ways of Christian obedience. It is indeed important that those who maintain the work of a technical society, should be men and women of integrity, who manifest the fruits of an authentic Christian life; but it is also important that they should be aware of the moral problems which are involved in every profession, and learn to give some guidance to others who may follow their steps. What does it mean to be a Christian doctor, lawyer, teacher or industrial manager? How far do the insights of the Gospel put a question mark against the presuppositions and methods commonly accepted in those professions, and which subtly affect even personal integrity? How can the work of theologians be brought into fruitful union with the technical and scientific work of industry, science or medicine which has a proper autonomy and must be pursued with unrelenting zeal for truth and disinterested motives, which demand a stern self-discipline from the worker? How can theologians, sociologists and scientists find a common language which will enable them to understand each other and to contribute to the solving of each other's problems?

This attempt to bring theological insights down from a remote theological stratosphere to the level of scientific and technical procedures, which dominate so much of modern life, should be treated as a priority by all Christians who have any qualifications for it. Only in this way can a meaningful content be put into the idea of Christian vocation, and the true mutual dependence of clergy and laity in the task of Christian witness be demonstrated. The results of one such

attempt to explore the meaning of Christian obedience in the realm of medical practice have been embodied in a book recently issued under the title *The Doctor's Profession*. Between 1945 and 1948, a group of Christian doctors in London met at irregular intervals to discuss the significance of their vocation. The Reverend Daniel Jenkins, in his capacity as an officer of the Frontier, was a member of the group and has assumed the responsibility of editing the material used in the discussions and of presenting it in a readable form. A good proportion of the members of the group were Roman Catholics, so that there was an authentic ecumenical element in this corporate thinking.

The National Health Service has affected profoundly the relation of the doctor to the patient, and the position of the doctor in the social order. Ever greater responsibilities are being thrust upon the doctor, who, as a scientist and a disinterested minister to elemental human needs, is frequently accorded the position which earlier ages gave to the priest as guide, philosopher, friend, and recipient of intimate confidences. But in an age when medical prestige is growing so rapidly, and the number of medical students is constantly increasing, there is grave danger that the training of doctors may be so narrowly technical as to sacrifice the prospect of a wider cultural and theological background. The Goodenough Report on Medical Schools issued in 1944, asserted that "a mere technical training will not fit a student to perform his future professional work properly". In two directions the education a doctor receives should be more adequate: first, so that he gains a much clearer understanding of his task in relation to the general life of society, and secondly, that he should be helped to obtain some criteria by which to make judgment upon the numerous ethical problems which confront him in his work.

In some parts of Europe, the Christian understanding of human life has been rejected, and as a consequence the Christian sanctions of medicine have been discarded. Many doctors elsewhere would reject the notion of vocation as meaningless and irrelevant, on the ground that their function is to be primarily technicians, who provide certain technical services. Yet grave moral problems remain for the doctor to solve by action often with little time for reflection. Are there circumstances in which what is sometimes called "mercy killing" is justified? What are the ethics of therapeutic abortion? When is it justifiable to destroy the unborn child for the sake of the living mother? What is to be the Christian attitude to the problem of "birth control", or the sterilization of the unfit? Does not the study of psychiatry appear to encourage an attitude of determinism which undermines the sense of personal responsibility which Christians would regard as integral in human nature? There are not likely to be easy solutions to any of these problems, but it is clear that Christians are called to advance beyond the simple conception of the relief of pain and suffering to a more coherent view of medical service, in relation to the Christian doctrine of man.

CATHOLICISM TO-DAY

ON October 31 of last year *The Times* published an article entitled *Catholicism To-day*, which at once commanded widespread attention in the correspondence columns of that newspaper. Only a

small selection of the letters which were received could be published, but as one Anglican writer observed after a considerable number of letters had been published, the correspondence "largely resolved itself into an exchange of views between English Catholics of the Papal obedience". The original article, which in view of its title must have had a Roman Catholic writer, discussed the prospects of a greater measure of co-operation between the Roman Church and other churches of the West, and delicately hinted at the possibility of a fresh examination of the distinction between essential and non-essential doctrines. It proceeded to assert that in the Holy Year now inaugurated, in face of the ruthless attempts in many parts of Europe to subordinate religion to political and economic interests, "there is widespread hope that Rome will make a gesture to the Christian world in keeping with the realities of the hour", which might include a programme of free and open discussion with qualified representatives of other Christian denominations.

Some comments may be allowed upon this interesting and significant correspondence. In the first place, great respect was shown by non-Roman writers to the exclusive claims which Rome continues to advance, and there was little evidence of the old contemptuous hostility, at least in the published letters. The majority of the non-Roman contributors were sufficiently "catholic" in sympathy to discuss the issue objectively, and to keep the debate on a high level of theological discussion. But it was a pity that evangelical non-Romans did not make clear that they also possess theological scruples which demand respect, and must be given due weight. If this was recognized, and only on these terms, nothing but good could come out of an attempt to open serious conversations with accredited representatives of Rome. Evangelicals have so often had occasion to deplore the isolation and self-sufficiency of Rome that any sign, however small, of a willingness to meet and discuss should be welcomed. It has been a tragic result of our divisions that until recently there has been no such intercommunication, to the impoverishment of the best life of both. Secondly, much of the correspondence was strictly irrelevant, as it resolved itself into assertions of the grounds for the exclusiveness of Rome and the impossibility of compromise on this point. Even such distinguished contributors as Arnold Lunn and Sir Henry Slessor showed a sensitiveness on this point, which might suggest an inner uncertainty about it.

Thirdly, the letters from English Roman Catholics advertised the existence of two distinct attitudes to the question of general Christian co-operation. Some perceived the necessity of the greatest possible degree of joint action (although this might be very limited) on moral issues of public importance, and openly urged the beginning of an attempt at serious and friendly discussion; while others, like the coadjutor Bishop of Brentwood, revealed "the hardrock of ultramontane intransigence in the Roman Church which has proved fatal to all previous attempts at co-operation". It is a pity that the letter writers did not grapple with the non-theological factors, which bear equal responsibility with theology for keeping the churches in separation from each other, and which require the most careful scrutiny if they are not to be rationalized into theological objections.