

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

by F. S. LEAHY

IF Reformed theology comprises, as it claims to do, the Christian view of God and the world, we shall expect to hear it proclaim the authentic word of God to every situation of human life, including the acute social and economic problems of our day. This aspect of our faith is considered in the following paper by the Rev. F. S. Leahy, of Belfast, an alumnus of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, and a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church—a Church which, inheriting as it does the ideals of the Scottish Covenanters, has always insisted on maintaining the Crown Rights of Christ our Redeemer in civil as well as in ecclesiastical causes.

THE fundamental principle of the Reformed faith lies in the field of the doctrines of God; it is essentially a theological principle, although it does have its anthropological, ecclesiological and other aspects. It is generally admitted that the sovereignty of God is the fundamental principal of Reformed theology, and consequently of the "world-and-life view" of its adherents. The Calvinistic confessions, for example, stress this most strongly—none more so than the *Shorter Catechism* of the Westminster Divines; and of their monumental work, Dr. B. B. Warfield declares that "the best thought of the best age of Protestantism was poured into them . . . they represent the *consensus* of Reformed doctrine in its most developed and most catholic form . . ." (*The Significance of the Westminster Standards*, p. 35). Thomas Carlyle admitted shortly before he died, that the older he grew, the more he was impressed with the first sentence in the *Shorter Catechism*, "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." And how many could endorse Carlyle's testimony. Calvin believed that the principal end of life was to know God. Warfield felt that Calvin's theology was "Theism come to its rights".

Professor Henry Meeter points out that this formative principle of the Reformed Faith is to be distinguished from Roman Catholicism in which the underlying principle is ecclesiological. And

Lutheranism, while it does stress the sovereignty of God, has failed, from the Reformed standpoint, to pass beyond the subjective question, "What must I do to be saved?" It finds peace in faith, and, as Warfield puts it, "stops right there". The question, of course, is of paramount importance, and Reformed theology is equally anxious to put it; but our theology does not stop there, it probes deeper—rather, it looks around and seeks the *source* of justification. This is not to suggest that the Lutheran does not think of the source of his faith, but that Reformed teaching lays the whole stress upon an objective vision, the vision of God in His glory. Thus we see that the thought of a sovereign God dominates and pervades the Reformed Faith.

The sovereignty of God was no mere abstract dogma to the Reformers—all of them, including Luther, believed that such a doctrine must influence the lives of men. As set forth in the historic Reformed confessions this basic principle undoubtedly is of supreme significance in Christianity as it applies to the whole of human thought and action. Is Christianity relevant to our age? Reformed theology replies in the affirmative, assuring men of a sovereign, holy and loving God Who controls all things. The "master-thought of the sovereignty of God is the spearhead doctrine of all consistent, full-orbed Christianity", declares Dr. Clarence Bouma. As the Church of Christ surveys the present scene she is faced with a challenge and an ethical task. A mere "fundamentalism" will fail to be relevant, but Reformed theology is not mere fundamentalism: it is a world-and-life view, with God as its centre and circumference. Doctrine and life are woven into one fabric—Christianity *is* relevant. Because of the strides of science, there is a sense in which our world is "smaller", and as it grows "smaller", its problems tend to become more acute. Political and social problems are the concern and responsibility of all. Only a radical message will meet the need of our world, and surely we have that message.

The problems of racial discrimination, crime, public health and housing, and such-like, are the concern of Christianity, if it is to be pervasive and radical. The "social gospel" of anti-supernaturalistic liberalism we believe is no gospel at all; if, however, we remain indifferent to these problems, we need not be surprised at the increase of rationalism. Our Lord made it clear that man does not live by bread alone, yet He did recognize his need for bread, and gave it to him. Too often His disciples down the ages have told men that they cannot live by bread alone and have then left them to starve! That is not consistent Christianity.

It would never have had the support of Calvin or Knox, or of the Dutch Calvinists. The need for applying the principles of Christianity to all of life is as great as ever. Dr. Garret Heyns, who has had experience at the State Reformatory at Ionia, Michigan, provides a good example when he writes: "We cannot demonstrate any sincerity by giving lip-service to this need of showing brotherly love and then going right ahead with our discriminations and prejudices."

We have seen that to the consistent Christian, to quote Dr. Bouma, "God becomes the first and the last in his cultural outreach, in his interpretation of the meaning of every aspect of reality, in his construction of every realm of human culture. . . . When once redeemed, the intelligent Christian has need of thinking through the meaning of the world in which he lives, to understand the cosmos in all its realms and phases in the light of Him Who is the Creator and Preserver of that cosmos." Such an endeavour will save a man from a merely moralistic modernism on the one hand, and a dead orthodoxy on the other—not to mention what Dr. Bouma aptly terms a "mystical, world-fleeing passivism".

In any serious study of the social problem, we cannot ignore the claims of Roman Catholicism and Communism in this connection. It follows logically from Rome's attitude to the individual and the family, that she will have no doubts about her ability to manage society at large, and even the nations, if they will permit her. Her claims are in accordance with our expectations. Rome's treatment of the individual is *external*—she regenerates him through baptism, and, later, communicates Christ in the "consecrated host". Her endless rites and ceremonies are intended to reach his soul—but the approach is largely external. It is only to be expected, therefore, that in dealing with society, Rome will use a similar technique. The treatment is external. We observe a pseudo-Christian authoritarianism, working publicly through the hierarchy and privately through the confessional. Rome is guilty of one of the chief errors of the Communism she denounces—the attempt to *manipulate* society from without. Rome would do so in the interests of the Church; Communism would do so in the interests of society itself: the objects are different; the technique is the same. In both cases liberty is sacrificed. Neither Rome's mediaeval approach, nor Communism's view of society as an end in itself, can ever meet the need of social man.

Reformed principles are incompatible with a soul-less Communism, or the Romanism that organizes work on sectarian lines. It was Dr. Abraham Kuyper who spoke of "the principle of sphere

sovereignty"—i.e., "every sphere of human society has its own principles of life and action, its own type of authority. The Church, the industrial realm, and the State—to use three examples—are three different spheres of human life and action in which the principles that determine the authority obtaining in them differ. . . . Each sphere, in this sense, is autonomous . . . the Church has no right to tyrannize the other spheres, nor has the State" (Dr. Bouma's interpretation of Kuyper's "sphere sovereignty"). Kuyper recognized that everything in human society is inter-related, and that, for example, the authority of the State was, in a sense, universal; but each one of the other spheres, however, had an authority quite distinctive, and that distinctive authority of each sphere must be respected by every other sphere. The reason for this is that all spheres are bound by the sovereignty of God, from whom they derive their own type of authority. The reader should apply this principle of "sphere sovereignty" to the Church, the State, industry, the home, etc. "Sphere sovereignty", a truly Reformed principle, is incompatible with Roman Catholicism which makes the Church supreme over the whole of human life; it is incompatible with Communism which exalts the State in an equally idolatrous and tyrannical fashion; and it is just as incompatible with a predatory industrialism whose denial of either Christian or humane discipline has alienated the worker from God and gone far toward transforming him into a *thing*. Consistent Christianity, we feel, should be constantly striving to apply the sovereignty of God practically to life in every realm—Church, school, industry; economic, social and even international affairs. All this is just another way of saying that society can only be saved by Christ—who has come from the bosom of the Father to show us the Father, who is the "Word" of this sovereign God. Christ is the one and only Mediator between God and man, and therefore the only Saviour of our world. This Christ, we note, sanctified manual labour at a carpenter's bench. And eminent secular economists have been driven, at times, to confess that only this Christ can be the "Saviour of Society", that the social problem cannot be solved on the principle of unlimited selfishness which engenders unlimited competition. The remedy must be moral and spiritual—this implies the use of our labour as a means to the common good, and this good is not always assessable in material gain.

If the Church is to maintain a constructive witness in this realm, she must turn to the Scriptures for relevant principles. But here another problem arises. The Scripture revelation is cast into the moulds of the social life of a people and age radically different

from ours. The theocracy of Israel is indeed remote from the social and institutional patterns with which we are familiar in modern life. We must avoid the mere historical relativism which humanism would endeavour to take as the main message of Scripture, and the naïve literalism of a certain brand of "fundamentalism" which goes to the opposite extreme. Our search, therefore, must be for abiding moral principles which express the will of God for society—these we must extract from the temporary patterns in which we find them embedded in the Holy Scriptures. The Gospel which Christ preached included social justice, and that was but one of the points of contact Christ had with the prophets.

Professor Alexander Miller has rightly reminded us that the Deuteronomic Law "ranges over the whole reach of man's social life, noting those practices which break the human community and divide man from man, in specific the withholding of the goods of the earth which are given for man's necessities; condemning the monopoly in land and in wheat which is the apparatus of exploitation; putting every detail of social-commercial dealing—like the payment of wages and procedures in the matter of debt—under the scrutiny of an implacable and compassionate righteousness". Professor Miller declares that in the New Testament the delineation of what the divine holiness requires is "not reiterated but taken for granted". The new Law of the Gospel is the "quintessence of the old". "The act of faith which sets a man within the new Community is an act of exultant solidarity, wholly spurious unless it issues in the feeding of the hungry and the clothing of the naked". This author contends that to be reconciled to God in Christ is not to be separated from our fellow-men, "but to be so profoundly joined to them that their necessities become our intimate responsibility. . . . To give men bread is not to affirm that they live by bread alone, but to witness that we do not". Such a thesis commands our respectful and sympathetic consideration in that it endeavours to extract permanent principle from Holy Writ, relevant to the issue—in considering it, we need not lose sight of Luke 12: 51 and similar passages.

Christ was not unconcerned about those who were "standing idle all day in the market-place", and the social contrast between Dives and Lazarus was not beyond the scope of His gospel. But the Church has not always followed Christ in this respect.

The "communism" of Russia is too shallow, and that of Rome's monasticism, too narrow—while industry, until it acknowledges the sovereignty of God in Christ, is in slavery to the interplay of economic and material pressures, making things material the sole

end of life. The key to the social question is only found in Christ. Dr. R. McCheyne Edgar refers us to "a Christian socialism attempted immediately after the Pentecost". The new converts, in their fervour, set up a "commune" in Jerusalem. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" (Acts 4: 32). From the common fund they drew, "not a dividend according to the capital invested, but according to each man's need". And so, for a time, poverty was virtually abolished in that Christian society. "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4: 34, 35). But this socialism was not practicable—there were too many selfish Ananiases and Sapphiras, and persecution soon helped to shatter the miniature paradise. "But the dream", comments Dr. Edgar, "has only been postponed. A day will dawn at the long last when the Christian Church shall become a magnificent Christian commune, and Christians shall be content with the supply of their needs, realizing that 'a dinner of herbs, where love is, is better than a stalled ox and contention therewith'."

Reformed thinkers have been calling for a blue-print or programme of action, on the basis of which Christians may grapple more helpfully and realistically with the social problem, as it affects both employer and employee—in fact, the relationship of man to man. At the beginning of this century, Dr. Edgar suggested such a plan: "Christianity . . . can affirm that co-operation, rather than competition, is the logic of the Gospel. It can encourage profit-sharing and promote goodwill between labour and capital. It can emphasize the dignity of work and the meanness of able-bodied dependence upon charity. It can preach stewardship and the solidarity of the race. It can promote temperance and make self-indulgence detested. It can foster public spirit, and urge men to 'live not unto themselves but unto Him Who died for them and rose again.'" The writer feels that whatever may be said as to the merits and demerits of such a programme, it at least could serve as the basis of a serious discussion of the social problem, within the context of Scripture, and ultimately of Christ.

Acceptance of Christ as Saviour and King involves a radical change of attitude to God, to oneself and to one's fellows. Christianity is relevant because it is radical, all-embracing, and above

all because it is divine, in that it points man to a sovereign God Who has spoken to us in these last days by His Son. There is, however, a danger to be avoided in this connection. It has been admirably described by Dr. J. G. Machen: "If you regard religion merely as a means to attain worldly ends—if you regard religion, for example, merely as a means of meeting the present emergency of this world—then you have never even begun to have even the slightest inkling of what the Christian religion means. God, as He is known to the Christian, is never content to be thus a mere instrument in the hands of those who care nothing about Him. The relation to God is the all-important thing. It is not a mere means to an end. Everything else is secondary to it." "It is impossible", says Machen, "to attain the lower end until the higher end has been attained." Referring to the words of Christ, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple", Dr. Machen commented that whatever the words meant, they certainly showed that "the relationship to Christ takes precedence of all other relationships". Upon that sound position, he proceeded to build a sound argument. Christianity would combat Bolshevism, but if it were accepted merely to combat Bolshevism, it would not be Christianity. Christianity would eventually unify a nation, produce a healthy community, promote international peace—but if Christianity were accepted in order to reach any of these goals, it would not, declared Machen, be Christianity at all. "Our Lord said: 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' But if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness *in order that* all those things may be added unto you, you will miss both those other things and the Kingdom of God as well." (See "Social Problems" as discussed in Professor Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, and *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*.)

Thus we become aware of extremes to be avoided—a narrow "fundamentalism" which is obsessed with another world, and forgets that Christianity fully meets the social needs of man in any age, while it conducts him to his eternal home (such fundamentalism must never be confused with the historic Reformed faith); a purely utilitarian and humanistic approach to Christ, which fails in every respect; and the "gospels" of Roman Catholicism and Communism, which systems, despite their avowed enmity, share at least one serious error in this connection. The doctrine of regeneration has been omitted by humanism, which often declares that nature as at present constituted can be influenced and ennobled by the

principles and example of Jesus. Historic Christianity denies that most emphatically. "Ye must be born again." Christ said that in many ways, but He never contradicted Himself. We must seek first the Kingdom, the "higher end"; only then can we grapple with the social problems of our day and move towards the subordinate end, realizing that the seeking of the Kingdom must ever come first, that man has his origin and destiny in God. The Reformed conception of the sovereignty of God will ultimately affect a man's attitude to every sphere of human activity and enable him, by the grace of God, to glorify God, thus enjoying Him for ever. Such an attitude of mind and heart will obviate the errors we have noted, and make it impossible for the Christian to exist in a religious and social cocoon—consequently his position, while not so comfortable, will be much healthier.

Belfast.