

## THE CHURCH AND POVERTY

Other organizations may conceivably be indifferent when confronted with the chronic or acute poverty of our cities. The Christian Church cannot. The very name of "Christian" would turn into an indictment if it did not concern itself in the situation in some way.

One answer to the challenge of the Christian spirit has been the organization of institutional church work. A church perhaps organizes a day-nursery or kindergarten, a playground for the children, a meeting-place for young people, or educational facilities for those who are ambitious. It tries to do for people who are living under abnormal conditions what these people under normal conditions ought to do for themselves. This saving helpfulness toward the poor must be distinguished sharply from the money-making efforts of some churches called institutional, which simply run a continuous sacred variety performance.

Confront the Church of Christ with a homeless, playless, joyless, proletarian population, and that is the kind of work to which some Christian spirits will inevitably feel impelled. All honor to them! But it puts a terrible burden on the Church. Institutional work is hard work and costly work. It requires a large plant and an expensive staff. It puts such a strain on the organizing ability and the sympathies of the workers that few can stand it long. The Church by the voluntary gifts and labors of a few here tries to furnish what the entire cooperative community ought to furnish.

Few churches have the resources and leadership to undertake institutional work on a large scale, but most churches in large cities have some institutional features, and all pastors who are at all willing to do it have institutional work thrust on them. They have to care for the poor. Those of us who passed through the last great industrial depression will never forget the procession of men out of work, out of clothes, out of shoes, and out of hope. They wore down our threshold, and they wore away our hearts. This is the stake of the churches in modern poverty. They are buried at times under a stream of human wreckage. They are turned aside constantly from their more spiritual functions to "serve tables." They have a right, therefore, to inquire who is unloading this burden of poverty and suffering upon them by underpaying, exhausting, and maiming the people. The Good Samaritan did not go after the robbers with a shotgun, but looked after the wounded and helpless man by the wayside. But if hundreds of Good Samaritans traveling the same road should find thousands of bruised men groaning to them, they would not be such very Good Samaritans if they did not organize a vigilance committee to stop the manufacturing of wounded men. If they did not, presumably the asses who had to lug the wounded to the tavern would have the wisdom to inquire into the causes of their extra work. (247-248)

## THE HOSTILE ETHICS OF COMMERCIALISM

Human nature is the raw material for the Christian character. The spirit of Christ working in the human spirit is to elevate the aims, ennoble the motives, and intensify the affections. This process is never complete. The Christian is always but in the making. [...]

In urging the social duty of love, Christianity encounters the natural selfishness of human nature. But this is not a hostile force. It is the instinct of self-preservation without which no child would survive. In a well-trained child the frank egoism of the baby is steadily modified by a growing sense of duty and of solidarity with the family and the little social group in which it moves. With the

change of adolescence comes a powerful instinct of self-devotion to society. If the influence of Christianity accompanies the child during this development, and comes to conscious adoption in the adolescent period, it gives an immense reinforcement to the moralizing influence of the family and the school, and creates a character ready for real social life and service. If the larger human society into which the young man or woman then enters were adapted to continue the social training given in the family and the school; if the industrial life which molds the adult set tasks for conscious social service and inspired all workers with the sense of moral solidarity; social life would be so closely akin to the Christian conception that the task of Christianity would be easy, and comparative success would be within reach.

Instead of that the young adult in the most plastic time of his development is immersed in an industrial life which largely tends to counteract and neutralize Christian teaching and training. Competitive industry and commerce are based on selfishness as the dominant instinct and duty, just as Christianity is based on love. It will outbuy and outsell its neighbor if it can. It tries to take his trade and grasp all visible sources of income in its own hand. The rule of trade, to buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest, simply means that a man must give as little to the other man and get as much from him as possible. This rule makes even honest competitive trade—to say nothing of the immense volume of more or less dishonest and rapacious trade—antagonistic to Christian principles. The law of Christ, wherever it finds expression, reverses the law of trade. It bids us demand little for ourselves and give much service. A mother does not try to make as rich a living as possible, and to give a minimum of service to her children. It would be a sorry teacher who would lie awake thinking how he could corner the market in education and give his students as small a chunk of information as possible from the pedagogic ice-wagon. The relation between a minister and a church is Christian only when the church pays him as well as it can afford to do, and he gives as wholehearted and complete service as he can get out of himself. There are some professions and some social relations which are in the main dominated by the Christian conceptions of solidarity and service, and they are the only ones that arouse our enthusiasm or win our love. Industry and commerce are not in that class.

Commerce has moved away from the golden age of competition, when businessmen were like Ishmaels, with every man's hand against every other man. Large social groups are now working on the principle of cooperation in great corporations. That develops loyalty and human goodwill within the cooperative group. But only within it. Every trust still has a lot of outsiders whom it has to fight and tame into submission. The wonderful mechanism of a great department store is not directed merely to mutual service, but also to the undoing of its competitors. A board of directors may feel a sense of coherence—modified by a fear of treachery—but when they turn toward their employees and toward the public, the sense of solidarity ends. It is probably fair to say that the great business world is not appreciably influenced in its daily struggles by the consciousness that it exists to serve mankind. A minister, a doctor, a teacher, an artist, a soldier, or a public official may forget it often and may turn traitor to the principle altogether; but if he is good for anything, he will always feel the constraint of the higher principle upon him. In these callings it is comparatively easy for a man to realize the joy and strength of that principle, if he is only willing. In business life the constraint is all the other way. The social value of business is reserved for ornamental purposes in after-dinner speeches. There all professions claim to exist for the good of society. At a recent dinner of the Pawnbrokers' Association of New York, Mr. Abraham Levy spoke of the company as "the benefactors and bearers of the burdens of the poor," and doubtless he believed it when he said it.

Every human institution creates a philosophy which hallows it to those who profit by it and allays the objections of those who are victimized by it. [...] [T]he competitive industry has its own

philosophy to justify the ways of business unto men. "Competition is the life of trade." "If every man will do the best for himself, he will thereby do the best for society." In short, the surest way to be unselfish is to look out for Number One.

This individualistic philosophy was worked out at the end of the eighteenth century in order to cut away the artificial restraints inherited from a bygone period of industry. The noblest thinkers enthusiastically believed that the unfettered operation of self-love would result in happy conditions for all. Experience has proved this a ghastly mistake. Scientific thought and practical statesmanship have abandoned the policy of unrestrained competition. The more enlightened businessmen, too, view it with moral uneasiness and a certain shame. The selfish hardness of business life is to them a sad fact, but they feel they must play the game according to the rules of the game. Yet as long as competitive commerce continues and is the source of profit in the business world, competitive selfishness will be defended as the true law of life.

As soon as the competitive philosophy of life encounters an opposing philosophy in socialism, it is angrily insistent on its own righteousness. The same is the case when any attempt is made to urge the Christian law of life as obligatory for business as well as private life. "Don't mix business and religion." "Business is business." These common maxims express the consciousness that there is a radical divergence between the two domains of life, and that the Christian rules of conduct would forbid many common transactions of business and make success in it impossible. Thus life is cut into two halves, each governed by a law opposed to that of the other, and the law of Christ is denied even the opportunity to gain control of business. When a man lives a respectable and religious life in one part of the city and a life of vice in another part, he is said to live a double life. That is the heartbreaking condition forced upon Christian businessmen by the antagonism of Christianity and competitive commerce. They have to try to do what Christ declares impossible: to serve God and mammon. It is no wonder that many try to maintain their faith in their own integrity of character by denying that business life is antagonistic to Christianity at all. But the rest of the community judges differently. The moral sincerity of the most prominent members of the churches is impugned by the public, which has little sympathy with the tragic situation in which Christian businessmen find themselves. This deeply affects the moral prestige of the churches in the community. They are forced into the defensive instead of challenging the community to a higher standard of morals.

When two moral principles are thus forced into practical antagonism in daily life, the question is which will be the stronger. If the Church cannot Christianize commerce, commerce will commercialize the Church. When the churches buy and sell, they follow the usual methods and often drive hard bargains. When they hire and dismiss their employees, they are coming more and more to use the methods of the labor market. In the teaching of the Church those elements of the ethics of Jesus which are in antagonism to commercial life are toned down or unconsciously dropped out of sight. The Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus clearly defines the points of difference between his ethics and the current morality, is always praised reverently, but rarely taken seriously. Its edge is either blunted by an alleviating exegesis, or it is asserted that it is intended for the millennium and not for the present social life. When the religious teachings of Tolstoi first became known in the 80s, they gave many of us a shock of surprise by asserting with the voice of faith that these were the obligatory and feasible laws of Christian conduct. Thus the principles of commerce affect the moral practice of the Church and silence its moral teachings insofar as they are antagonistic to business morality.

We pointed out that there are some departments of life which are to some degree under the actual dominion of the Christian principle, especially personal morality, the family life, and neighborly

social intercourse. But the principle incorporated in business life is so deeply affecting the methods of action, the points of view, and the philosophy of life as preached in the press and in conversation, that it is encroaching even on those realms of life which have hitherto been blessed by Christ's law. If Christianity cannot advance, it will have to retreat even from the territory already claimed by it.

If the Church cannot bring business under Christ's law of solidarity and service, it will find his law not merely neglected in practice, but flouted in theory. With many the Darwinian theory has proved a welcome justification of things as they are. It is right and fitting that thousands should perish to evolve the higher type of the modern businessman. Those who are manifestly surviving in the present struggle for existence can console themselves with the thought that they are the fittest, and there is no contradicting the laws of the universe. Thus an atomistic philosophy crowds out the Christian faith in solidarity. The law of the cross is superseded by the law of tooth and nail. It is not even ideal and desirable "to seek and to save the lost," because it keeps the weak and unfit alive. The philosophy of Nietzsche, which is deeply affecting the ethical thought of the modern world, scouts the Christian virtues as the qualities of slaves. It glorifies the strong man's self-assertion which treads underfoot whatever hinders him from living out his life to the full. The philosophy regnant in any age is always the direct outgrowth of the sum total of life in that age. We view Neo-Platonism, for instance, as the necessary product of the third century. It is safe to say that students of some future century will establish an intimate causal connection between the industrial system which evolves the modern captain of industry and the philosophy of Nietzsche which justifies and glorifies him.

On the other hand, among the masses who are being ground up in this evolutionary mill there will be a growing sense of the inexorable cruelty of natural law and a failing faith in the fundamental goodness of the universe. And if the universe is not at bottom good, then the God who made it and who runs it is not good. Or perhaps there is no God at all. Goodness is folly. Force rules the world. Let us use what force we have, grasp what we can, and die. The Church in the past has been able to appeal to the general faith in a good and just God and to intensify that. If that half-unconscious religion of the average man once gives way to a sullen materialism, there will be a permanent eclipse of the light of life among us.

This is the stake of the Church in the social crisis. If one vast domain of life is dominated by principles antagonistic to the ethics of Christianity, it will inculcate habits and generate ideas which will undermine the law of Christ in all other domains of life and even deny the theoretical validity of it. If the Church has not faith enough in the Christian law to assert its sovereignty over all relations of society, men will deny that it is a good and practicable law at all. If the Church cannot conquer business, business will conquer the Church. (251-256)