

The Social Problem

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

W.H. Griffith Thomas emphasizes the Church's moral responsibility to address social problems while focusing on individual regeneration through the Gospel.

Scripture: Proverbs 14:31, Proverbs 31:8, Isaiah 1:17, Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:9, Luke 10:27, Galatians 6:2, 1 Timothy 5:8, James 1:27

Topics: "Social Justice", "Christian Reform"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas emphasizes the clergyman's awareness of social ills and the moral responsibility to address them, highlighting the need for social reform and the implicit social program in the Gospel. He discusses the importance of individual evangelization through the Gospel and the distinction between personal regeneration and social regeneration. Thomas stresses the role of the Church in uplifting the material life of people while cautioning against identifying Christianity with specific social or economic reform schemes. He encourages clergy to join Christian Social Union, engage in temperance work, and support the Peace Movement for social reform.

Transcript

Section 1. The Social Problem.

It is impossible for a clergyman not to be alive to the social ills of the present day. As he contemplates the men, women, and children who are compelled to live in unwholesome surroundings; as he sees the ill effects of so-called "charity" bestowed upon those who are suffering misfortune; as he realizes that the resources of the country, if only properly developed, are sufficient to afford every man a comfortable living; as he observes the awful ravages of the drink traffic; as he is brought face to face with the luxury and extravagance of many of the rich, he cannot but feel that "these things ought not so to be." Almost every social problem has its moral aspect, and each of us, as a part of our complex social system, has his own measure of responsibility for the plight of those who are suffering from the social evils of our day.

The clergyman is also fully aware of the fact that a social program is implicit in the Gospel. Mr. Benjamin Kidd says: - "The Reformation liberated as it were, into the practical life of the peoples affected by it, that immense body of altruistic feeling which had been from the beginning the distinctive social product of the Christian religion. ... To the evolutionist (the Reformation) is essentially a social development." And Macaulay said: - "The Methodist Revival improved the quality of West of England cloth."

Or to come to more recent days, we are all fully aware of what men like John Howard did for the criminal code, Wilberforce and Buxton for the liberation of slaves, and Lord Shaftesbury for the protection of workers. It is thus impossible for a clergyman to be indifferent to the great and pressing question of social reform.

Section 2. The Province of the Church. But what can a man do in his sphere and office as the clergyman of a parish? While social reform has its undoubted moral aspects which compel the attention of Christian men, it also has its political bearings, and this fact constitutes a call to the clergyman to be careful lest he should appear solely to take sides with his own political party. During the last few years a great deal of attention has been given to the social teaching of the Old Testament prophets, and it has often been pointed out that they were fully alive to the social ills of their day; the Drink and Land questions; the sins of intemperance, luxury, and greed.

But we must never forget the fundamental difference in their position. Church and State were then absolutely identical, and the social ills of Jerusalem were regarded as due to departure from God. While, therefore, we may rightly use the principles and standards of the Old Testament in our work today, we must never overlook the essential differences of the situation. We cannot possibly expect the same results as they expected, for Christianity has never been in the same authoritative relation to any State.

Our main work today is the evangelization of individuals through the Gospel. It is the function of the Church to "view every problem, every question, and policy, and service, sub specie aeternitatis, i.e. in the light of man's responsibility to God." [W. M. Clow, *The Secret of the Lord*, p. 61.] Another tendency in modern thought has led to the identification of the kingdom of God with a regenerated human society. But this is not the New Testament meaning of the kingdom. The outlook of the New Testament is on the future, not on the present, and the Kingdom of Heaven is something far more and deeper than social regeneration.

Our duty, therefore, is the constant emphasis on the moral side of social questions which at their foundation are a question of goodness and badness. Mr. Bryce, in his book on *The Failure of Citizenship*, attributes the disappointing results of modern reform to the failure of people to respond to the demand for virtue and an intelligent public spirit. The explanation of this failure he attributes to three great evils: indolence, selfishness and party spirit. "The central problem of civic duty," says Mr.

Bryce, "is the ethical problem." Great questions are never political for long; they become moral and religious. Christianity emphasizes sin, but the social reformer is only concerned with selfishness; and yet it is when the latter is seen to be due to the former that we shall get men and matters right. Christianity urges personal reform. Socialism cries out for corporate action. One emphasizes regeneration, the other legislation. Now the latter is great and important, but the former is still greater.

We must insist on both. It is nothing new for the Church of Christ to emphasize the necessity for uplifting the material life of the people. In all ages the Church has been the pioneer in care for the orphans, the aged, the destitute, and in provision for the mind and for the body. We must never think that the Church has only just begun to realize the importance of corporate work and philanthropic effort. On the contrary, it is quite possible that Christian men in past days have done very much more as individuals to bring about new conditions than is being done today by all the corporate effort of all the Churches.

We must be particularly careful not to identify Christianity with any ideas and schemes of social and economic reform. None of these schemes are final; and if Christianity should be found to identify itself with

any of them, the ultimate results may easily be morally and spiritually disastrous. Even Socialism is admittedly not a final solution, and may give place to some other project. It would therefore be futile for the Church to associate itself solely with certain precise schemes for the betterment of social and industrial conditions.

At the risk of being misunderstood, we must call attention to the fact that Jesus Christ Himself was not a Reformer, and He did not organize men to bring about a reconstruction and improvement of human life. What He did was to supply the entire motive force for every aspect of living, and the clergyman will fulfill his duty best by proclaiming those eternal truths of the Gospel which make first of all for individual and personal regeneration, and this in turn will lead to every aspect of social and moral reform in the community.

Section 3. The Work That Is Possible. But it may be asked, Cannot a clergyman do something more than proclaim principles? Is he to be prevented by political fear from entering personally into the question of social reforms which have a definite and direct moral bearing? By no means; there is much that he can do to further the interests of the best social reform. First of all, he should join, and encourage his thoughtful people to join, the Christian Social Union, which, while it does not pledge itself to any particular scheme of social improvement, still less to any attempt at revolution, does lead people to look at the problems for themselves, to examine into the conditions of social life, and to endeavour to solve the problems from a Christian standpoint.

A clergyman who will get his laymen and laywomen to attend to work of this kind will do much for the furtherance of permanent reform. Then there is also much that he can do in connection with the work of temperance. It does not require a man to be a total abstainer to be conscious of the enormous evil of the drink traffic, and it is the bounden duty of the clergyman to endeavour to instruct and influence public opinion on this great problem. His Band of Hope and Temperance Meetings will be useful in the way of prevention, for by careful instruction on the various aspects of alcoholic drinks he will do much to bring about a better state of opinion and feeling.

Only he must be careful that his temperance work is good, thorough, and lasting. No mere temperance entertainments are worthy of attention unless they are constantly and carefully associated with clear teaching and personal inspiration. In these days it is imperative that a clergyman should take a firm stand on all matters connected with the drink traffic. This at least is one of the social ills that has so direct and pointed a moral bearing, that whatever be the risk of being regarded as political or prejudiced, the clergyman must dare to take it and wage warfare to the utmost against this "enemy of our race".

Another way of doing social work will be found in active cooperation with the Peace Movement. The great question of International Arbitration is one of the ways in which a clergyman can advocate the great principles of the Gospel in their bearing on social and national life without any risk of political partisanship. It is well-nigh impossible to overestimate the significance of the present movements on behalf of International Arbitration, and the Churches can do much to bring about a better state of feeling between nation and nation, especially in showing how literally true it is that "war is hell".

The great mass of working people in the various nations, upon whom the greatest portion of the burden of war falls, is feeling that the weight is now heavier than can be borne, and is crying out for relief. If therefore the Christian forces in the nations stand for international understanding and organized goodwill, they will be helping to bring about a social reform second to none in importance. This is work that can be done by

the clergy in their parishes from time to time without any hesitation.

Beyond these two questions of Temperance and Peace the general problem of active social reform becomes undoubtedly difficult because it is involved with political issues. Industrial conditions, the treatment of pauperism, protective legislation for workers, the housing of the people, and above all, the land question, are so fraught with economic and political intricacies that a clergyman can hardly be blamed if he contents himself by preaching principles, and insists upon his hearers making their own definite social applications.

But, on the other hand, we must not brand as a party politician the man who sees keenly the moral aspects of social questions, and who therefore believes it to be his duty to throw the weight of his influence on the side of the oppressed, the badly-housed, the poorly-paid, and in favour of righteous dealings between masters and men, corporations and employees. No fear of the charge of politics should deter a clergyman from speaking out on these matters. It is passing strange that so many earnest godly laymen do not see the social implications and applications of the Christian doctrines of justification and regeneration, and it is therefore not surprising if a clergyman feels led to show his people some of the social consequences to which the Gospel pledges us.

The one supreme requirement is that we should proclaim the truth in its fullness, and show in all possible ways that the Gospel is adequate to the solution of every problem, whenever it is allowed proper application. What we have to make sure of first is that we are preaching a full, spiritual, definite Christianity, starting from the new birth and issuing in the redeemed, regenerated, and renovated Christian life. There is much force in the words of a man who addressed some Christian ministers when he said, "You Christian ministers preach a social Christianity, by all means; an applied Christianity; but be sure first that you have a Christianity before you talk about applying it." Given this, the clergyman must then see that no part of life is left untouched by the Gospel.

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