

The Community

"The Social Gospel"

By J. S. Woodsworth, Secretary of the Social Welfare League

"This social gospel may be all very well but what we need is personal religion. Social service will never save a man. He must be born again. The old-time religion is good enough for me"—such a position is not infrequently met with and this kind of superficial talk really troubles many good people who are feeling their way toward the light.

There are several ways to answer a man who talks like this. The first is to say nothing. If he is a very old man or very "set" or very narrow, then I throw up my hands. He belongs to an earlier age; he lives in another world. It is waste time to "argy" with him—for into empty argument your conversation will inevitably degenerate.

If he is very dogmatic and self-satisfied, I may be tempted to answer a fool according to his folly, somewhat along this line: The trouble with the new message is that it is altogether too personal. The man who has made his money by real estate "deals," who goes to church regularly every Sunday and is a liberal subscriber to missions is often one who objects to the minister talking economics in the pulpit. He would rather listen to a soothing anthem or some platitudes about "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe." It quite upsets him to be told that his money is extorted from the poor people and that when we understand economic principles more clearly he will be classed with the common thief. He has an uneasy suspicion that perhaps the preacher's teaching contains a measure of truth. But then that would mean that he ought to give up real estate speculation—perhaps even that he ought to give back to the public some of the unearned increment that he has been able to secure. Ah, but that touches his pocket and the real estate speculator's pocket is very near his heart. No! He starts back with a shudder. The old-time religion is good enough for him. He puts an extra dollar in the collection and then shuts his eyes and "spiritualizes" his thoughts as he joins in the last hymn, "There is a better land, far, far away."

Yes, the trouble is that the social gospel is altogether too personal. It means repentance of the old-fashioned kind—"a knowledge of sin, a sorrow for sin—a turning from sin and a turning to God." It means a new birth—the entrance upon a new kind of life—the setting up of a new social order. It means the seeking first of the Kingdom, a Kingdom of justice and goodwill and trusting that somehow or other our finances will look after themselves. The social message means the simple gospel—that's what's wrong with it!

Saints and Sinners

Our good, easy-going church people have been so long accustomed to dividing the world into saints and sinners, and classing themselves as among the "saints" that it jars them a bit to be suddenly called sinners. That is what the Pharisees—the religious people of their day—so deeply resented in the teaching of Jesus. The social gospel means a new line-up. Some of the complacent "saints" are going to find themselves down among the sinners, and some of the self-confessed sinners are to their surprise going to find themselves entering into the teachings and life and spirit of Jesus. But this line of argument is, I fear, answering a fool according to his folly. It will not turn the fool from his folly. Neither will it carry us very far in understanding our present-day needs and experiences and relating them to earlier needs and experiences.

The religious experiences of our fathers were real. Our earlier religious experiences were real. But we should recognize that we now live in a different day. We cannot hope to repeat our own earlier experiences or those of our fathers. New experiences and richer experiences await us.



Rev. J. S. Woodsworth

Life manifests itself in many forms. The new form does not mean that the old life has vanished; it may mean that the old life has grown too rich and full to be contained in the old forms.

The mysterious force which we call electricity heats the kitchen range, runs the sewing-machine and lights the house. It is the self-same energy, tho sometimes it manifests itself as heat, sometimes as

power, sometimes as light. Religion in our day is not dead. It is manifesting itself in new forms of energy or life. Perhaps the political meeting may be as religious as the prayer meeting, or the single tax discussion as the old-time class meeting. Think it over!

The earlier psychologists said that man possessed three "faculties," intellect, feeling and will. Later psychologists point out that the mind is one and indivisible, but that sometimes it expresses itself in knowing or intellectual or cognitive processes, sometimes in feeling or emotion, sometimes in volition or action. They show that one process presupposes the others and runs into the others—is, in fact, part and parcel of the others.

Varieties of religious experience, it sometimes appears to me, correspond somewhat to these three classes of psychical activity. Let me put it in a very crude materialistic way. The ideal man's religion would be one part intellectual, one part emotional, and one part practical. But none of us is perfectly well balanced. Some men's religion runs all to their heads. It is intellectual and cold. Get a group of such men together and they build up creeds and systems; they are always talking about light and truth. With other men, their religion resides in their heart. It is warm and emotional. They are always talking of their experiences and how happy they feel. They group themselves together for quiet acts of devotion or hand themselves together for evangelistic effort. With still another class, their religion pours out thru their hands in practical effort. They always want to "do something." Perhaps they haven't much light and haven't much heat, but they make the wheels go round. These people are beginning to group themselves for the doing of the social work that has been so long neglected. Now intellectual religion often despises emotional religion and emotional religion often denies that practical religion is religious.

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