

# Sermons for the Unsatisfied

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

## II.—Faces to the Future.

The world is divided into backward-looking men and forward-looking men. The backward-looking man likes to quote history, which shows that he has never read it intelligently. He says history repeats itself, which is precisely what history never does. He refuses to act without well-established precedent and thereby shows himself lacking in the initiative and courage that are essential to progress. He eulogizes the heroes of past ages and fails to recognize the true patriot of his own day. He builds the tombs of the prophets, and thus, by his very absorption in the past and his indifference to the present, he shows himself a true son of those who, in their day, killed the prophets.

It is easy to join the backward-looking; it takes the effort of one's life to keep "eyes front." From our earliest childhood we were told to follow the example of our elders who also claimed to be our betters. In our school days, individuality was suppressed. The chief end of the scholar seemed to be to keep the rules. The wild impulses of youth were repressed by social conventions. The authority of the law was duly impressed upon us, not merely by those in authority and under authority, but by our own bitter experiences when we ventured to turn aside from the beaten paths or to cross forbidden boundaries. Many a comrade resigned himself to what he regarded as the inevitable and "settled down" into the comfortable life of conformity, orthodoxy and convention. He had, to borrow a phrase with a very different meaning, "joined the great majority."

Yes, that is the difficulty. The great dead "mass of inertia" which calls itself orthodoxy is always in the majority. The independent thinker, the reformer, the man a hundred years before his time, is always a lonely man, opposed and discounted.

It is so much easier to act with the crowd. The plaudits of the crowd, the rewards of the crowd, the inspiration of the crowd, the fellowship of the crowd, the ethics of the crowd, the religion of the crowd—all seem dominant.

Why not join the crowd? To each little seed is given a tiny spark of a something we call life. This life is an expanding force that breaks thru its protecting envelopes, pushes up the clouds, rises into the air, and becomes a mighty tree, so that the birds of the heavens lodge in its branches. Similarly a tiny bit of humanity forces itself into an inhospitable world, loosens himself from his mother at arms, breaks away from the home circle, and thru storm and stress at last becomes a man. Thus it is with all life. The divine force simply will break thru. That is its nature. When we cease to grow, we begin to die.

"The way my father did!"—what an excuse for physical and intellectual and spiritual laziness! Unless some one had pushed forward the boundaries of civilization we should still be all cave-men, or perhaps be shinning up trees like the animals who physically we most closely resemble.

"The way my father did!" As a matter of fact, my father was a progressive man, that is why I admire him. I am worthy to be called his son only as I have caught his spirit. My duty is not to follow in his steps, but start in where he left off to blaze a path deeper into the wilderness.

Probably much of our Bible study is lost time. We are immensely interested in the division of Canaan among the ten tribes. In the meantime, Canada is being divided up and settled by people representing a score of nationalities. Surely the Canadian problem is, for us, of immensely more importance than the Canaanitish problem. "But," you say, "God was with the people in older time." And may we not ask, is He not with the people of today? Then is God the God of the dead but not of the living? The atheist is not the man who doubts the historicity of the old testament stories, but the man



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who acts as if "spiritual forces were absent from the world today." "Ah, but this is new and dangerous teaching! It is not what I was brought up to believe." There you are again, my backward-looking friend. That was the most serious accusation which the scribes brought against Jesus. They were, for instance, punctilious about Sabbath observance; Jesus was more concerned about helping those in trouble, so they denounced him as a Sabbath breaker, a

friend of publicans and sinners. Or again, they had been taught "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," and Jesus taught the unheard-of doctrine "love your enemies." Traitor, away with him!

Let the modern prophet hear for his encouragement the warning of Jesus. "The disciple is not above his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Nowhere more than in political life do we worship the god of things as they have been; "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be," is the refrain of the politician. What precedent have we? What did the other party do? These are the questions in which alone he is interested.

We need more men of the Oliver Cromwell type. In face of a great crisis, he swept the mace from the table and started out to make history. But let us, even in this new country, propose something new (the referendum for example), and we are told that it is un-British, unconstitutional, that it hasn't been tried or hasn't been tested. We are, of course, not arguing here for the referendum, but we submit that there is a prevalent "stand pat" attitude that is not truly conservative, that conserves nothing, but simply blocks all true progress. The world is marching on and we must march with it or fall behind in the race.

The trouble is that both our political parties are fundamentally conservative. They wish to conserve their own interests. They are not keen to launch out into unknown waters. In this country they fail to really represent the people. But suggest that we do away with party government and of course both parties and all their followers are up in arms. "Why," they exclaim, "party government made England." They might have gone on, "one party supported King Charles and the other party cut off his head. We could never do without party!" So, irrespective of changing conditions and modern needs, we consistently hold fast to that which is good—and that which is bad.

Two men stand in doubt at the parting of the ways. One man turns to the right. He may be wrong. The other man refuses to move lest he should make a mistake. He undoubtedly is wrong. He gets nowhere.

We are in the midst of a world war. Let some one have the hardihood to suggest that wars may some time cease, that spiritual forces are more powerful than physical, and again our wise men shake their heads. "Wars always have been and think of the benefits of war!" So the modern seer is pushed to one side as an idle dreamer, an impractical idealist, a sentimental theorist, an unbalanced altruist.

The argument seems to run: "The old prophets were stoned, Jesus was crucified, they all came to a bad end; let us be practical," and cheerfully we set about the oft-attempted but impossible task of overcoming militarism by means of militarism, of driving out Beelzebub thru the power of Beelzebub. We are consoled by the fact that at least this is no new-fangled or untried method.

Perhaps our attitude is due to a lack of imagination. Ten years ago a few venturesome pioneers attempted aerial navigation. Some of them perished. "Ah," exclaimed the backward-looking men, "it can't be done. Thruout the ages it never has been done. It is against all natural laws." But the forward-looking men, "laughed at impossibilities" and

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