

Christ's Doctrine of Society

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COULD the system of Christianity exist apart from society? In other words, how would the principles of Christ's gospel work out between one man and God? Before answering this question, let us consider what are the results which Christ expects from man's acceptance of the lessons of life which He taught. We read in Corinthians that the essence of the gospel is charity or love. Man can neither develop this nor show its presence apart from dealings with his fellow-men. If we love not our fellow-men whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen? If a man were to live all his life by himself, not coming into contact with his fellow-beings, the words kind, gentle, patient, honorable, could not be applied to him. There are terms that have no meaning apart from society.

Then society is implied in the very notion of Christianity. The aim of Christianity is to develop the ideal individual through the instrumentality of society, and the ideal society through the individual.

Before the coming of the influence of Christ into the world there was in existence highly organized forms of society. There were developed features of government and of national life so good that we honor them yet, and take lessons from them. In ancient Greece there flourished an almost ideal democratic form of government. The average citizen was well educated. The state undertook that He attended all the deliberations on state affairs, and had a real voice in the government of his country. That sordid commercialism and greed for gain, which is the curse of our age, had no place there. The material was everywhere subjected to the intellectual. The state undertook to find the key to the problem of life in the intellectual nature of man.

In the civilization of Rome we have perfection of organization and law making. The Roman state showed the value of institutions for realizing ideals or social purposes. The dream of Rome was to conquer the world, and her institutions were able to do it because they were so perfectly organized. Every man was in his place, and knew just what his powers and duties were, from the emperor down to the common soldier. These ends which the civilizations of Greece and Rome realized are good ones—very important in forming the ideal society. Both these civilizations had their day and then died, because they were suited only to the time in which they flourished. They lacked those deep-rooted and permanent principles which are eternal and apply to all ages.

The thing considered most valuable in Greece was intellectual attainment, possible only to the few. Christianity sought to find a solution to life's problems in man's moral nature. Since the moral nature is common to all alike, and is possible of development in all, such a solution was universal for all application. Hence we say that the feature which distinguishes Christian civilization from pre-Christian is individualism.

In the day of the breaking down of these systems, when it was apparent that the old ideals according to which society had been organized were no longer adequate to the human race, which was merging out of childhood and youth into manhood, Christ came and showed to the world new laws or ideals. He put into society the small drop of heaven which by our age has grown so large and has so widely permeated society and which will eventually leaven the whole lump.

The new principle which Christ introduced may be summed up in the word INDIVIDUALISM. Greece was concerned

with the individual, but in what respect? In respect to his relation to the state. The man existed for the state, not the state for the man. The aim of Greek education was to produce good citizens, men who would efficiently serve the state. But who were the individuals who came under the solicitude of the state? Not half the population. The rest were slaves and were regarded as cattle. Rome gave no care to the individual as such and for his own sake. He was trained to become part of a great machine—the powerful organization of the state.

These, then, are the three weaknesses of these pre-Christian civilizations:—their recognition of only a part of the population, their failure to regard a man as a man and not as part of the state, and their looking to the intellectual instead of to the moral nature of man for the solution of life's problem.

Thus, Christ gave the world a new idea when He answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Men had not yet learned to respect the individuality of those in classes of society different to their own. This was a principle so new as to have submerged itself in the world to-day,—had needs and rights equal to their own. This was a principle so new that it was not easily comprehended, and between Christ's day and ours society has been organized on several different bases, each perhaps in a measure suited to that stage of development of the human family to which it was adapted, and each striving as best it could to express Christ's ideal of individualism.

In the age of feudalism the strong man undertook to protect and provide for his poorer and more helpless neighbor in return for the service he rendered him. He considered his poorer neighbor not as a rational being equal to himself. But, nevertheless, in the responsibility which the powerful baron felt for his dependent, we see an expression of the teachings of Christ. In that age the church took on the same form which the Catholic Church retains to-day. Its attitude to the common man was kindly, but it provided for his spiritual needs without treating him as a creature who had mind enough to transact his own affairs with heaven. Then the feudal baron and the church became corrupt, forgot their obligation to the human beings over whom they exercised power, and remembered only that power.

When this society broke down, as had that built up by Greece and Rome, came the French Revolution, professing to bring liberty, equality and fraternity, not only to France, but to all men. This society was founded so grandly and so wisely as Wordsworth thought the millennium was near at hand. But after the clouds of war and bloodshed cleared away, and the principles of the revolution were in a measure set working, it was found that the liberty, equality and fraternity that existed, permeated lower down the social scale than ever before, but there was at the bottom a large portion of society to whom those at the top did not think of applying the new principles.

In this stage of the organization of society we see more of the heaven of the gospel. Christ's great lesson of the brotherhood of man was not yet fully understood.

It remained for our own twentieth century to witness the coming into its own of the lowest class of society. We see in the world about us a greater spirit of Christian brotherhood among men than has existed at any other age. The next age will in this respect be yet more Christian than ours.

Thus, all through the ages, the organ-

ization of society has been changing, and every time a new form comes in it approaches nearer to Christ's principle—the ideal individual developed through the state, and sincerely the ideal state through the individual. Each age has its own interpretation of Christ and His teaching, and each interpretation is more lofty than the preceding one.

Tennyson expresses this idea as follows:

"The old order changeth, giving place to the new,
And God reveals Himself in many ways."

He beautifully gives the idea that every form society assumes is the expression of a feeling after God, according to the best that the age knows. In these lines from "In Memoriam":

"Our little systems have their day—
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

Thus on through future ages, so long as the world lasts, will the old order keep on changing for something higher and better, something expressing a clearer understanding of those lessons taught among the Judean hills so long ago, which seemed so simple, but which have taken the world so long to understand completely. As time goes on gleams of the light from Christ's teaching will become less and less broken, until at last the full understanding and acceptance of the principles of the Gospel will bring to earth the full light of heaven.

What can we do to increase the light in our age, and who is to bring it? The poorest and lowest of men are now recognized as our brothers, and to-day we pay the greatest honor to the men who do the most for their welfare. Perhaps we would not be very far wrong in saying that there is no man in England to-day more popular and more generally admired than Lord George Wimborne, because he is devoting his great powers to the uplift of those who are helpless. Governments are beginning to see that it is their duty to look after the interests of those so submerged in poverty and ignorance that they cannot help themselves. In Toronto the City Council is investigating the slum district and planning to have proper houses built in the suburbs for those who now live in houses not fit for human beings.

In almost every country in the world are to be found branches of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association, which exists for the purpose of caring for young people who need help and sympathy and guidance. In connection with the University of Toronto there is a club-house down town in the heart of the slums, where some of the most clever of the men students go, and through teaching, gymnasium work and sport, try to raise the lives of those foreign slum children to a higher level. And this work is not carried on in connection with any church, not even with the Y. M. C. A.

All this is but a practical expression of Christ's teaching regarding the brotherhood of man and the value of the individual.

What can be our part in this great world movement that is going on everywhere about us? It may be expressed in the words, "Intelligent Service."

We must study the conditions surrounding us, study Christ's principles, and then apply them to those conditions. We cannot work out our own salvation alone, or develop our characters. There is no way to do that except through intelligent, unselfish service. It is not only a "twice blessed." We might say, Service is twice blessed; it blesses him that gives and him that receives.