

# The Teaching of the Protestant Church

By F. ERNEST JOHNSON

Research Secretary, Commission on the Church and Social Service, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America

THE teachings of Protestant Christianity on any particular subject lend themselves much less readily to exact statement than those of the Catholic Church. This is due in part to the great variety of communions in Protestantism which do not closely agree among themselves. One of the earliest notable statements of the Church's relation to industry recognized this limitation. "The Protestant churches of the United States have had, until now, no authorized common ground. Labor, industrial workers, trades unions, have discussed that attitude of "the Church," and the whole body of believers has, theoretically, been included. As a matter of fact, "the Church" has been some individual organization, some one of the denominations or some voluntary assemblage, non-representative and without authority."<sup>1</sup> Aside from this limitation there is a tendency in Protestantism to be less specific in ethical precepts and to deal with moral questions, whether individual or social, in universal rather than particular terms.

Probably it must be admitted, too, that the Protestant communions have been much slower in coming to conscious recognition of industrial problems as calling for a specific treatment by the Church. Spiritual responsibility for a very large section of the working world has given rise to a body of Catholic doctrine bearing upon industrial conditions and relations that is quite without parallel in Protestantism. Moreover, the authority of the Church in matters

generally referred to as "temporal," rather than spiritual, has been steadily disputed in Protestantism, and a clear interpretation of scriptural teaching on industrial problems has been consequently slow in forming.

Yet there is a body of doctrine, gradually taking form in the Protestant churches, which represents an effort to express Christian principles in terms of the working life of the people. This body of teaching has no uniform vehicle of expression, although the "Social Ideals of the Churches" are an approach to a Protestant statement of social faith with particular reference to industry, and are, in fact, commonly referred to as the "Social Creed." This declaration, which is by no means complete or adequate, cannot be said to be fully authoritative since not all the Protestant bodies have accepted it. It must be admitted also that those denominations which have ratified it do not consider it as having the same weight as a statement of theological faith. Nevertheless, it constitutes a definite approach to a statement of Christian principles in relation to industrial life.

Ecclesiastical developments within Protestantism have had a palpable effect upon the application of ethical principles to economic and industrial problems as far as the authority of the Church is concerned. The increasing assumption of power by the laity in Protestantism has put the determination of the Church's official attitude and effectual teaching more and more in the hands of men whose primary interest and activity have been in the sphere of practical business. "The

<sup>1</sup> *The Church and Modern Industry*, page 7. Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

Church as an owner and an employer," said the Federal Council of Churches in this connection, in 1908, "gravitates naturally toward the position where men of business experience and ample resources come into leadership."

This has inevitably put a check upon the elaboration of Christian teaching in social terms, a development which has had freer course in the Catholic Church. Thus it happens that the Catholic Church, which has maintained the doctrinal tradition of Christianity substantially unmodified and which therefore appears to be theologically conservative as compared with Protestantism, is at the same time more liberal in its explicit teaching with reference to matters economic and industrial.

#### PROTESTANT INDIVIDUALISM

Protestantism was originally, of course, an individualistic reaction. One of the principles of the Reformation was the "universal priesthood of believers." As a corollary of this principle, Protestantism necessarily lays emphasis upon the immeasurable worth of the individual life. One consequence of this emphasis has been unfortunate. Undoubtedly the development of the *laissez-faire* theory in economics, with the inevitable result of unrestrained privilege, is in part due to the strong individualistic tradition of Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinistic form. A more legitimate and, it is to be hoped, more permanent product of our Protestant tradition is the growing insistence upon regard for the principle of the worth of personality in the distribution of wealth, opportunity and power.

Thus there are two contrary influences in Protestant tradition having to do with the individualistic emphasis which characterized the Reformation. One has facilitated the development of that extreme individualism which

marks the capitalistic order, while the other has opposed this tendency by putting forward the claim of *every* individual to be free from the encroachments of *any* individual. The latter influence is coming to overbalance the former in modern, as distinguished from early, Protestantism.

Protestant teaching, then, concerning industrial questions, is crystallizing around the doctrine of the worth of the individual as the possessor of personality. This is taking place largely by way of protest against the tendency of modern industry to submerge the individual in industrial mechanism. Protestant leaders are identifying Christian teaching concerning human life and human relations with the claims of democracy. This change of interpretation is the natural outcome of wholly unofficial but virile and influential movements with which are connected the names of such great religious leaders as Charles Kingsley, Frederick W. Robertson, Frederick Denison Maurice, Canon Barnett, Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch. In its beginnings the Methodist movement, led by Wesley and his associates, although it did not come to consciousness in the sphere of industry, contributed to a growing concern for the well-being of every individual regardless of social status. The Baptist and Congregational churches have contributed notably to the conservation and carrying forward of democratic traditions.

#### ACTIVITY OF AMERICAN CHURCHES

The first conspicuous signs of a definite concern with matters economic and industrial within Protestantism as a whole, appeared in this country in 1908 when the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was formally organized, and authorized the creation of a Commission on the Church

and Social Service. This Commission was instructed to "recognize the import of present social conditions" and "especially to secure a better understanding and a more natural relationship between workingmen and the Church."

The statement announcing the creation of the Commission declared that "there are many phases of the present industrial conditions in the United States which cry aloud for immediate remedy. The Church, which has obligations to every sort of interest and person in the community, must be identified, locally and nationally, with the whole of the people more markedly than with any part of them, and will be sensitive to every influence which affects the larger constituency." And again, "multitudes are deprived, by what are called economic laws, of that opportunity to which every man has a right. When automatic movements cause injustice and disaster, the autonomy should be destroyed. That to these impersonal causes are added the cruelties of greed, the heartlessness of ambition and the cold indifference of corporate selfishness, every friend of his fellow must with grief and shame admit." Thus the foundation was laid for the developments of the intervening years. The Social Creed of the Churches, whose formulation was commenced in 1908, attained its present form in 1912 and was further interpreted in the light of present problems by the four resolutions of 1919 dealing with the requirements of industrial democracy. Twelve of the sixteen articles of this Creed have definite reference to industrial conditions and relations.<sup>1</sup>

By way of reënforcement of the Social Ideals of the Churches, liberal pronouncements have been made by the Board of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Coun-

cil of Congregational Churches, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the Northern Baptist Convention, the Methodist Church of Canada and other communions. The sixteen articles of the Social Creed have been ratified by the Young Men's Christian Association, while the Young Women's Christian Association has ratified not only the Creed but the four supplementary resolutions as well.

In 1920 the Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, created jointly by the Federal Council of Churches and the General War Time Commission of the Churches, published *The Church and Industrial Reconstruction*<sup>2</sup> which, while unofficial, has been accepted as a summary of liberal Protestant thought concerning industrial problems. In this formulation the teaching of Christianity which bears upon industrial problems is held to be threefold:

1. The intrinsic worth of personality. This gives to every individual "distinct and measureless value as a child of God and a potential member of His Kingdom."

2. The organic unity of human society. "Personality can fulfill itself only in a social setting, its values be realized only in fellowship." Thus the ideal of human life is the universal brotherhood.

3. The motive of service. This means that "property is to be subordinated to spiritual ends," that it has "social significance as expressing a responsibility for service," and that claim to it is justified only when based upon service rendered.

By way of application of these principles, the writers of the book insist first that the Christian conscience must judge the holding of property on the basis of its use; that is to say, property that is held with reference to the power and advantage which accrue to the owner rather than to its social usefulness violates a spiritual principle. As to the wage system, it is recognized

<sup>1</sup> The document appears in full on page 126.

<sup>2</sup> New York, Association Press.

that the wageworker does not possess economic freedom. The law of supply and demand as applied to labor is declared to be unchristian. Every occupation should furnish to the worker not merely a livelihood but the greatest possible measure of creative satisfaction. Competition is considered permissible from a Christian point of view if it is primarily competition in service or in achievement, but never if it has reference solely to pecuniary reward. Especially is it to be condemned if it leads to the establishment of permanent privilege and advantage. The seeking of private profits as a "primary motive in economic competition" must be regarded as inconsistent with Christianity. As a struggle for the larger share of the world's wealth, in which human beings are pitted against each other, it must be abandoned if Christianity is to prevail. In short, this formulation of Christian teaching insists that the present industrial system is defective because of the undue stimulus which it gives to selfish motives.

It is asserted further that Christianity prescribes not only the goal of social effort, but also the method of true progress. That method involves first, the development of love as the inclusive principle which conserves personal values, promotes brotherhood, and practices service; secondly, the promotion of faith in the triumph of the divine will in the world, which implies likewise faith in human nature; and, finally, the direction of spiritual growth through education.

*The Church and Industrial Reconstruction* calls upon Christian employers to give new recognition to the spiritual worth of their employees and particularly to the principle of collective bargaining and the sharing of the management of industry. Christian investors are urged to assure themselves that their investments are not

merely financially sound, but socially beneficent. Christians as employees are counseled to go about the business of production not merely as a means of livelihood, but as a service to the entire community, and to promote among themselves the ideals of democracy which employers have been called upon to recognize. Upon Christians as consumers is laid the duty to concern themselves with the labor conditions involved in the production of what they buy and thus to ally themselves with the salutary movements within industry itself. Finally, Christians as citizens should secure through political action the highest well-being of the workers and should strive to reach an intelligent and fair conclusion as to the causes of industrial conflict or other industrial evils, using their influence to safeguard free discussion and to bring the truth to light.

#### ACTIVITY OF ENGLISH CHURCHES

In England very important work has been done in the last few years in formulating Christian teachings with respect to economic and industrial questions. The Archbishops' Fifth Committee of Inquiry, which submitted in 1919 an elaborate report on *Christianity and Industrial Problems* was in reality the precursor of the American Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, to whose report reference has just been made.

A group of twenty British Quaker employers held discussions during 1917 and 1918 at the conclusion of which they published a statement concerning the duties of Christian employers in which they took advance ground. Much of the statement has to do with the details of industrial betterment, but a part of their conclusions constitutes a Christian testimony that has far-reaching spiritual significance. "Some employer may tell us that we are asking

him to draw too many practical inferences from a religious formula. But the conviction we have outlined is more than a formula. It is a vantage ground, from which we can survey the whole field of social and industrial life, seeing in it, not sheer blind turmoil, but a vast meaning and a vast hope. There is but one way of escaping from the implications of such a conviction, to abandon it entirely, to forsake the vantage ground and to forget the only vision that could dominate our whole lives. Then the world of industry may revert to a soulless chaos in which we strive for our own ends. But those ends, even as we achieve them, will seem meaningless and vain."

The Lambeth Conference, which met in England in 1920, declared that "an outstanding and pressing duty of the Church is to convince its members of the necessity of nothing less than a fundamental change in the spirit and working of our economic life" in order to realize such aims as the foregoing statements have contemplated. The conference enumerated the immediate objectives without which a Christian industrial order cannot be realized, all

looking in the direction of greater freedom and security to the individual and more brotherly relations in industry. As to the competitive system, the Bishops declared that "the dominant principle in a rightly ordered society will be coöperation for the common good rather than competition for private advantage. It cannot be said that this principle rules our present system."

In conclusion it must be said that there is an unmistakable tendency, even among the most conservative Protestant communions, to restate the teachings of Jesus in social terms and with particular reference to economic and industrial problems. There is no consensus of Protestantism as to the full implications of Christian teaching in this field, but the churches are undoubtedly moving in the direction of insistence upon a full recognition of the rights and needs of the individual, upon a more democratic distribution of the product of industry and of power and responsibility in industrial management, and upon the dominance of the service motive as over against competition for material gain.