

# CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING  
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Published monthly by  
THE PRESBYTERIAN AND  
REFORMED PUBLISHING CO.,  
501 Witherspoon Bldg., Phila., Pa.

MID-SEPTEMBER, 1931  
Vol. 2 No. 5

\$1.00 A YEAR EVERYWHERE

Entered as second-class matter May 11, 1931, at  
the Post Office at Philadelphia, Pa., under the  
Act of March 3, 1879.

## The Social Significance of Jesus Christ

IT would be misleading to speak of JESUS CHRIST as a social reformer. It is well within the truth, however, to say that He has been the most effective of social reformers. A comparison between the social conditions that prevailed before His advent and those that prevail in Christendom today, supplemented by a comparison between social conditions in Christian and non-Christian lands, evidence His unique effectiveness as a social reformer. Bad as are existing social conditions throughout Christendom, they would be infinitely worse were it not for the heaven He cast into the meal of humanity. Moreover if Christianity should cease to function in this world, there is every reason to believe not only that no further progress would be made along these lines but that what has been gained would be lost. The thought we have in mind has perhaps received its most eloquent expression in the oft-quoted words of JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL:

"When the microscopic search of scepticism which has hunted the heavens and sounded the seas to disprove the existence of a Creator has turned its attention to human society, and found a place on this planet, ten miles square, where a decent man can live in decency, comfort and security, supporting and educating his children, unspoiled and unpolluted; a place where age is revered, infancy protected, manhood respected, womanhood honored, and human life held in due regard—when sceptics can find such a place, ten miles square on this globe, where the gospel of CHRIST has not gone and cleared the way, and laid the foundations, and made decency and security possible, it will be in order for the sceptical *literati*

to move thither and ventilate their views. But as long as these very men are dependent upon the very religion which they discard for every privilege which they enjoy, they may well hesitate a little before they seek to rob the Christian of his hope, and humanity of its faith in that Saviour who alone has given to man that hope of life eternal which makes life tolerable and society possible, and robs death of its terrors and the grave of its gloom."

Wherein lies the secret of CHRIST'S unique effectiveness as a social reformer? Unquestionably it lies in His ability to deal with sin. Other social reformers, except as they have been His followers, have had much to say about imperfect legislation, unfavorable environment, and such like; but they have had little to say about sin, notwithstanding the fact that sin on the part of somebody is the great root-cause of social misery. "Take away from the history of humanity," to cite the late JAMES ORR, "all the evils which have come on man through his own folly, sin, and vice; through the follies and vices of society; through tyranny, misgovernment and oppression; through the cruelty and

inhumanity of man to man; and how vast a portion of the problem of evil would already be solved! What myriads of lives have been sacrificed on the shrines of BACCHUS and LUST; what untold misery has been inflicted on the race to gratify the unscrupulous ambitions of ruthless conquerors; what tears and groans have sprung from the institution of slavery; what wretchedness is hourly inflicted on human hearts by domestic tyranny, private selfishness, the preying of the strong on the weak, the dishonesty and chicanery of society! . . . If all the suffering and sorrow which follows directly or indirectly from human sin could be abstracted, what a happy world after all this would be!" If JESUS had had as little to say about sin as have so many of our modern social reformers, His efforts along the line of social betterment would have been as ineffectual as theirs. His work has proven effective while that of others has proven ineffective because He alone is able to deal adequately with sin. It is this ability that puts Him in a class by Himself among social reformers; moreover it is because He possesses this ability that in Him alone is found any adequate warrant for supposing that a kingdom in which justice shall prevail, in which love shall be the law and happiness the universal condition, may yet prevail on the earth.

But while Christians, because of their faith in JESUS CHRIST, may expect a renewed earth wherein dwelleth righteousness we are not to suppose that as a class they are committed to any specific social scheme. Christianity as such does not take sides between the advocates of the present social order and that proposed, for

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instance, by the Socialists. Unquestionably there is much in the present social order, such as child labor, sweat shops, white slavery, alcoholism, unfair distribution of wealth, race hatred, militarism, that must be eliminated before anything like Christianity's hope for this world will have been realized. Equally unquestionable it is that there is much about Socialism (as it is commonly advocated), such as its irreligion, its materialism, its class hatred, that must be eliminated before it can even pretend to be in harmony with a social order that could rightly be called Christian. But Christianity as such does not decide the question whether an ideal social order is to come about through the elimination of the bad features and the strengthening of the good features of the existing social order, or, whether with the retention of what is good in the present social order, there is to be a reorganization of society along economic lines of a different sort. If most Christians oppose Socialism it is not because they are committed to the present social order by reason of the fact that they are Christians. Rather it is because they believe that as an economic arrangement Socialism would not bring about the good results its advocates claim. If they thought that the reorganization of society along the lines proposed by Socialism (or other ism) would produce not merely a social order that is more just and equitable and better fitted to develop a high type of manhood and womanhood than the present social order, but one that is more just and equitable and better fitted to develop a high type of manhood and womanhood than the present social order freed from its bad and strengthened in its good features, we may be sure that they would favor such reorganization.

But while Christianity as such is not committed to any specific social scheme, and while it does not make its appeal to any one class within the social order, yet its social affinities are and ever have been with the poor and oppressed rather than with the rich and the powerful. From this point of view its fundamental note was struck in those words from the prophecy of ISAIAH that JESUS took as the text of what has been called His inaugural address, to wit—"The spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; He

has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." If it be true that there are laboring men who suppose that Christianity is out of sympathy with them in their efforts to secure better conditions for themselves and their children, this finds its explanation in the fact that they have gotten their conception of Christianity from those who by their unsocial conduct have misrepresented Christianity before the world. There is no warrant for the notion that many working men apparently have that the sympathies of Christianity are with the so-called capitalist class. As a matter of fact, as has frequently been pointed out, the best elements in that social ideal that is preached by Socialism are themselves children of the Christian Church—prodigals, perhaps, strayed far from home and into strange companionships, but children none the less. No doubt there have been, and are, those who, though identified with the Christian Church, have made their way to wealth and power by exploiting their fellows and who surrounded with every comfort are indifferent to the welfare and happiness of others; but that only proves that they are Christian in name rather than in fact; it does not at all militate against the thought that only as the gospel of JESUS CHRIST is accepted and lived can we hope for the full coming of that kingdom in which there shall be no wrong or injustice or oppression, but only that which is just and right and according to the law of love.

"Poor world! if thou cravest a better day,  
Remember that CHRIST must have  
His own way;  
I mourn thou art not as thou mightest be,  
But the love of GOD would do all  
for thee."

It has sometimes been alleged that the emphasis JESUS placed on the salvation of the individual implies that He was indifferent to social conditions. No inference could be less warranted. Rather it indicates that He was wisely concerned about such matters, as the salvation of the individual is the condition of the salvation of society.

Inasmuch as CHRIST's effectiveness as a social reformer finds its explanation in His ability to deal with sin, the method by which we can best promote a better social order is the method of evangelism. All efforts to obtain better social conditions, whether by means of wise legislation or otherwise, ought to receive our sympathetic support. A mere change of environment, however, will not produce changed lives. As an old Jewish proverb has it: "Take the bitter tree and plant it in the garden of Eden and water it with the rivers there; and let the angel GABRIEL be the gardener and the tree will still bear bitter fruit." These things of themselves have no power to change men's nature. JESUS alone is able to do that. Hence it is only as He is made known unto men, and they are brought into right relations with Him, that we can hope for those men and women apart from whom it is vain to expect a truly Christian social order. "Even from the point of view of benevolence," to cite the words of the late JAMES STALKER, "evangelization is the deepest service that one man can render another. For while ordinary benevolence may feed the hungry and clothe the naked, evangelization enables the poor to feed and clothe themselves; because it touches the springs of manhood and self-respect and transforms the whole condition from within; and while it does so on a small scale in the individual and family, it does so no less on the great scale in the nation or race; for the whole course of history ever since the Advent goes to prove that wherever the light of the Gospel shines the blessings of civilization abound also." The enemies of the Gospel are, therefore, the enemies of a better social order. For the same reason those who are doing most toward carrying out CHRIST's last great command, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I command you," are those who are doing most toward bringing in a better order of society. The need of this age as of every age is an evangelization that teaches men to do all the things that JESUS commanded. In the very nature of the case men cannot take JESUS as their Saviour both from the guilt and power of sin and strive to do all the things He commands without becoming centers of influence that make for social well-being.