

The Church and Charity

BY HENRY WARE ALLEN

THE motivating principle in church work today is that of charity. The halls of learning where the minister was prepared for his work were largely endowed by and dependent upon charitable bequests, while the church itself is frequently indebted to charity for its endowment and sustenance. Gratitude is a commendable virtue, and our civilization is so greatly indebted to philanthropists for our libraries, colleges, universities, hospitals, foundations, and churches that the reaction of society is quite naturally expressed in the exaltation of charity as a virtue. Charity has, indeed, been given great honor in the church.

This undue emphasis is based upon the assumption that it is always more blessed to give than to receive. This supposition will, however, scarcely bear the test of careful analysis when one reflects that the recipient of charity is necessarily humiliated, up to the time when his pride is broken, by receiving alms for which he can give nothing in return. Of course, no one disputes the virtue of relieving distress. But if, by the introduction of a just social order, all need for charity were destroyed, this would provide the double advantage of cancelling the self-esteem of the giver and the humiliation of the recipient, which are involved in the modern enterprise of charity.

Under normal conditions, when charity together with poverty shall have been abolished, it will be recognized that an equal exchange of values should be the rule in every transaction and the present day ceremony of taking up collections for church expenses will then no longer be celebrated as a religious rite. Charity, which in perverted form has been given the honor of a shrine in the church, must be cast out to make room for a new shrine dedicated to the higher virtue of Justice. Charity is a satellite of poverty, and poverty is a disease of modern society caused by social injustice. The increase of this injustice is accompanied by a corresponding growth of institutional charity. Under normal conditions, where justice prevails, both in primitive and civilized society, there is no need of charity. There is no charity; excepting, of course, that of neighborly friendliness.

Today we have charity in a greater degree than ever before. Possible three-quarters of all governmental expenditures at Washington are for charity. And this has promoted the fiction that the government owes everyone a living. Under extraordinary conditions of fire, famine, or flood, the Red Cross must take care of the emergency. But this involves no charity. Of course the victims of unjust social conditions must not be allowed to perish. But it is the plain duty of society to anticipate and to prevent the disgrace of poverty by the simple method of just legislation instead of leaving treatment

of the problem to charity. Poverty is the substance of things dreaded, the evidence of unjust laws. Alms degrade the recipient. And when these recipients are to be reckoned by the tens of millions, as today, disintegration of self-respect and moral fibre is certain to follow.

Charity has a direct influence in keeping wages down and in destroying the motive for self-support. If society is just, it need not be generous. Said Tolstoy, "If you can afford to do so much for your poor, you must have robbed them pretty thoroughly first."

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Should the church extend its province so as to include responsibility for legislation directly affecting general welfare of the community? Can the church properly limit its responsibility to the four walls of the meeting house and be indifferent to those laws which affect the prosperity of all the people? All men will agree that the church cannot properly take part in partisan politics or lend itself to the promotion of any doubtful social reform or fad. But those who assert that the church should confine itself strictly to the spiritual welfare of its members will find themselves already answered by the changed character of the modern church, and the attention to man's physical welfare which this involves.

The science of political economy founded on justice, given to the world by Adam Smith, Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, and Henry George, has generally been eliminated from the curriculum of colleges and universities. The science of political economy bears the same relation to the behavior of government as does the moral code to the behavior of the individual citizen, and the church must be as responsible for one as it is for the other.

The church itself cannot survive if our civilization is destroyed. And it requires only a slight knowledge of history to realize that countless civilizations, many of them highly advanced, have gone down to destruction for having violated considerations of justice in the treatment of its citizens. Gibbon shows conclusively that this was the case with the fall of the Roman Empire, and there is evidence on every hand that we at this time are repeating those fatal mistakes. The moral law is equally inexorable with nations as with individuals. The punishment is made to fit the crime in either case.

When the church goes to the root of the matter by determining the cause of poverty instead of dwelling upon its manifestations, it will then, for example, instead of inveighing against the horrors of war, be guided by the mandates of political economy which invariably promote international good will, peace, and prosperity.

Other distinct causes are responsible for the elevation of charity into the place of justice in the church. Charity, linked with Faith and Hope, has been extolled as a superlative virtue in one of the most beautiful passages of scripture. But we have been honoring a perverted char-

ity because of mistranslation of the Scriptural meaning of the word, which was love, not alms-giving. This confusion of terms has been responsible for a long train of evils. A powerful influence in holy writ for charity at the expense of justice is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, justifying the same payment of wages to those who had worked only one hour as was paid to those who had worked twelve hours. The employer had a perfect right, of course, to give what he pleased to the laborers who had worked only one hour, but payment to them for the eleven hours during which they did not work was not wages earned; it was a gift. In this case, it is clear that charity profited at the expense of justice.

The generally misunderstood words, "The poor ye have with you always," were an observation and not a prophecy. The poor are not necessarily poverty-stricken. The church has, at the behest of charity, been so busy bailing the boat that it has not been interested in stopping the leak. Eternal vigilance is quite as much the price of justice as it is the price of liberty.

A Christian minister recently exclaimed, "Would that a Moses would arise to deliver us out of this depression!" Had "Progress and Poverty" been used as a textbook in his college, he would have known that a Moses had already arisen in our own times and had shown a scientifically perfect method of treating the enigma of the century, that of undeserved poverty with progress.

To those who assert that the church should confine itself strictly to the spiritual needs of its members, still another answer has already been given by the oldest and most conservative of all Christian churches, the Roman Catholic. More than fifty years ago, Bishop Nulty of County Meath, Ireland, in an address to the priests of his Diocese, clearly demonstrated in classic language the right of the common people of Ireland to the use of the land given them by the Creator and without having to pay tribute to alien landlords. Then in 1888, his Holiness, Pope Leo XIII, issued an encyclical upon the condition of labor, and his successor, Pope Pius XI, has recently issued a similar letter on the same subject. Here is evidence that the Christian church has recognized its responsibility for the physical, as well as the spiritual welfare of man. For the church to assert complacently that it has no interest in economic problems is very much like a select party in the cabin of an ocean steamship sending out word that they were engaged in spiritual culture and were not interested in the fact that the ship had sprung a serious leak, or that the crew were fighting a fire.

What would be thought of a health officer who spent his time warning against a certain disease when his plain duty was to direct the removal of well known causes of it? That is exactly wherein the church has erred in its attitude toward poverty, war, and crime. If it is worthwhile to pay attention to the manifestation of a disease, to be consistent, its source must be ascertained and eliminated. The conclusion of the whole matter is that the church of today can no longer honor charity

as a virtue. It must accept its responsibility by going to the root of the matter in order to eradicate that poverty which violates the will of the Creator and is responsible for more misery than any other one cause.

The greatest of all conflicts today is that between poverty and prosperity. They cannot rightly exist together. Where one gains, the other loses. Prosperity is the natural condition of man, evidently intended by the Creator in the bountiful provision which he has made, actual and potential, for all His children. Poverty, on the other hand, is an unnatural visitation brought upon human society by the stupidity of man himself in failing to recognize, and to be governed by natural law. When the church comes to recognize fully its responsibility to the Creator and to mankind, it will inaugurate a mighty movement for the abolition of that greatest enemy of man, undeserved poverty.

Poverty does not necessarily mean a lack of riches. It does not exist with primitive people whose wants are few and easily satisfied. It did not exist in human society until a comparatively recent time. On the other hand, the poignant pangs of poverty frequently exist behind brownstone fronts with those whose incomes have been reduced or lost. As was stated by Carlyle, "The hell of which Englishmen are most afraid is the hell of poverty." And when, as today, millions of American citizens are dependent upon charity for sustenance, a condition exists which produces fear throughout all classes that they themselves may be precipitated into the distress which they see beneath them. For the fear of poverty may even be worse than poverty itself.

It is poverty and the fear of poverty which more than anything else is responsible for the ending of thousands of lives by suicide. Poverty is responsible for perhaps nine-tenths of the rising tide of crime. Every human being is endowed with a divine spark which makes human nature good; and the average man prefers to do that which is right rather than that which is wrong. But poverty drives men to the crime of robbery.

One phase of this change which the enormous power of the church might bring about is international free trade. This, more than any other one factor, it is believed, would produce that world-wide peace and good will, disarmament and prosperity for which Christian people constantly pray, but the enactment of which they leave to Almighty God.

The abolition of this modern phenomenon, undeserved poverty, is not the impossible or even the difficult task which it generally is supposed to be. Prosperity will logically follow the repeal of unjust taxation. The process will simply be the liberation of those beneficent forces of nature, ordained by the Creator, which are ever ready to serve mankind, but which have been thwarted by stupid man-made laws. Obedience to the demands of Justice is the only condition necessary to the abolition of poverty and the consequent liberation of prosperity.