

The Impact of War and the Social Gospel

The present economic system stands revealed as one of the roots of the war. The insane pride of Germany, her passion for world-domination found an occasion in the demand for colonies as markets and sources of raw materials—the imperative need of competing groups of industries carried on for profits.

The war has made more clearly manifest the moral perils inherent in the system of production for profits. Condemnation of special individuals seems often unjust and always futile. The system rather than the individual calls for change.

The war is the coronation of democracy. No profounder interpretation of the issue has been made than the great phrase of President Wilson's that the Allies are fighting to "make the world safe for democracy." It is clearly impossible for the champions of democracy to set limits to its recognition. The last century democratized politics; the 20th century has found that political democracy means little without economic democracy. The democratic control of industry is just and inevitable.

Under the shock and strain of this tremendous struggle, accepted commercial and industrial methods based on individualism and competition have gone down like mud walls in a flood. National organization, national control, extraordinary approximations of national equality have been found essential to efficiency.

The conclusion seems irresistible. The war is a sterner teacher than Jesus and uses far other methods, but it teaches the same lesson. The social development which it has so unexpectedly accelerated has the same goal as Christianity, that common goal is a nation of comrade workers, as now at the trenches, fights so gloriously—a nation of comrade fighters.

With the earthquake shocks of war thundering so tremendous a reaffirmation to the principles of Jesus, it would be the most inexcusable dereliction of duty on the part of the Church not to re-state her programme in modern terms and re-define her divinely-appointed goal.

The triumph of democracy, the demand of the educated workers for human conditions of life, the deep condemnation this war has passed on the competitive struggle, the revelation of the superior efficiency of rational organization and cooperation, combine with the unfulfilled, the often

forgotten, but the undying ethics of Jesus, to demand nothing less than a transference of the whole economic life from a basis of competition and profits to one of co-operation and service.

We, therefore, look to our national government—and the factor is a vital one—to enlist in the service of the nation those great leaders and corporations which have shown magnificent capacity in the organizing of life and resources for the profit of shareholders. Surely the same capacity can find nobler and more deeply satisfying activity in the service of the whole people rather than in the service of any particular group....

But we do not believe this separation of labor and capital can be permanent. Its transcendence, whether through cooperation or public ownership, seems to be the only constructive and radical reform.

This is the policy set forth by the great labor organizations and must not be rejected because it presupposes, as Jesus did, that the normal human spirit will respond more readily to the call to service than to the lure of private gain.

The acceptance of this report, it cannot be too clearly recognized, commits this Church, as far as this representative body can commit it, to nothing less than a complete social reconstruction....

We think it is clear that nothing less than the goal we have outlined will satisfy the aroused moral consciousness of the Church or retain for the Church any leadership in the testing period that is upon them. And in such an heroic task as this our citizen armies will find it possible to preserve, under the conditions of peace, the high idealism with which they have fought for democracy in France.

Source: "Report of the Committee on the Church, the War, and Patriotism," *Journal of Proceedings of the Tenth General Conference of the Methodist Church* (Toronto, 1919): 290–292.