

CHRISTIANITY AND BUSINESS

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IT has been a fashion of late years to bring Christianity into the field of economic controversies, not by mere doubts whether this or that economic practice agrees with the requirements of Christian ethics, but by questions about the ownership and operation of industry. It is contended that the motive of profit in industry and commerce is anti-Christian, and ought to be displaced by the motive of zeal for public service. According to this view, industry and commerce ought to be managed by government, and Socialism is the economic aspect of Christianity. Sometimes it is stated that one ought to be a Socialist to be a Christian, or that Capitalism is anti-Christian. Certain passages in the New Testament condemning rich persons or riches are cited in support of this view; but as they are not excessively appropriate to the theme, emphasis is laid not so much on them as on the spirit of Christianity which condemns covetousness, selfishness, oppression of one's fellows. As these are held to be essentials of Capitalism, it is concluded that Christianity and Capitalism are incompatible. In view of the uncertainty which this view has caused in some quarters, it may be of value to examine the passages in the New Testament which bear on the conduct of economic affairs and endeavor to discover Christ's economic principles from them.

Christ of course was not in business, himself, and derived no pecuniary benefit from his teaching or healing. "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests" he declared, "but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."¹ On one occasion he had not the money to pay a head-tax and had recourse to a unusual expedient, sending a disciple to the lake shore to take a fish which had a coin in its mouth.² When approached by Pharisees on the question of the tribute to the Roman authorities, he must borrow a coin to illustrate the necessity of giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.³ For his food, he depended largely on hospitality; and his habit of eating out, and eating rather well, with Pharisees on some occasions, with publicans and sinners on others, earned him hostile jeers as a glutton

1. St. Matthew, 8:20.

2. St. Matthew, 17:27.

3. St. Matthew, 22:19.

and a wine-bibber.⁴ It is recorded that certain women ministered to him of their substance for a short time at any rate.⁵ Sending out his twelve disciples on an experimental missionary tour, he told them to provide neither gold nor silver nor brass in their purses, nor script for the journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor staves, "for the workman is worthy of his meat": i.e. they were to obtain food and lodging from friends and converts. Similar instructions were given to the seventy; and certainly Christ and the disciples had no high economic status.⁶

Nevertheless, they were not penniless. From the emphasis on lack of provision for the missionary tours mentioned, we gather that for ordinary trips the disciples had a little money and extra clothing. Further, St. John tells us that they had a bag of which Judas was custodian; and they bought food with its contents on occasion and gave to the poor from it, while at times Judas helped himself.⁷ We infer that normally the bag had a fair quantity of coin. No doubt the disciples put into it whatever they had laid away before joining Christ's band; and probably relatives, friends and converts made contributions. The revenue was sufficient for food at ordinary times, and for renewal of clothing as well as charity; but it would not be great, and the term "apostolic poverty" may be accepted if we exclude the notion of destitution from it.

It is not to Christ's practice, however, but to his allusions that we must look for light on his economic theories; and the parables may serve as guides for us. We consider first his view of the operations of business. The kingdom of heaven is likened to a pearl of great price acquired by the sacrifice of a whole property. The owner of the property was a merchant seeking goodly pearls, i.e. in the jewellery trade, and certainly expected to make a profit out of the transaction. Here Christ likens the entrance into the kingdom of heaven to a commercial operation for profit, and the keenness of the merchant is compared to the zeal of the disciple who seeks that kingdom. We have here no condemnation, but implied approval of profit-seeking. Had Christ thought that the conduct of a jewellery business for profit was a sin, he would never have brought it into comparison with the kingdom of heaven. This parable alone enables us to state that Christ did not consider the private operation of business, and the making of a profit thereby, as wrong in themselves. On

4. St. Matthew, 11:19.

5. St. Luke, 8:1-3.

6. St. Matthew, 10:9,10 and St. Luke, 10:1-8.

7. St. John, 12:6 and 13:29.

the contrary, he took them perfectly for granted, and assumed their legitimacy.⁸

He has another story of this sort. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hid in a field; and when a man finds it, he hides the treasure, goes and sells all he has and buys the field. Here we have approval of getting rich quickly by treasure trove.⁹ The parables of the pounds and the talents confirm our conclusion. A nobleman, leaving home, deposits a pound with each of three servants and requires them to increase it by trading. On his return, he highly commends the servants who have made ten and five pounds respectively out of one; and he reproveth strongly the man who has hidden his pound in a napkin merely to keep it safe, telling him that he ought to have placed it with the bankers for interest at the very least. The servant who refuses to trade loses his talent by reason of his lack of enterprise and of interest in profits, and he is cast into outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Here the principle of a profit is not only commended but commanded. He who makes a profit deserves a reward, he who fails to do so deserves punishment, and the very word "unprofitable" carries a stigma with it. The noble is described as an austere or "hard" man, as we should say, who takes up what he does not lay down, and reaps what he does not sow. It is not necessary to conclude that Christ approved of harsh practices and large profits in business; but certainly he had no aversion to common mercantile enterprise. The story of the talents runs along the same lines; two or three servants made 100% by trade on the money entrusted to them, five and two talents respectively, while the third hides his talent in the earth. Again, the enterprising men of business are praised, the timid one is the villain of the piece. This parable may indeed be the same as the other, remembered in a different fashion by another narrator; but whether it is or not, it points the same moral, the legitimacy of business and of profits.¹⁰

For his metaphors, Christ drew not only on trade but on banking; and again we have sufficient evidence for his view of this form of economic activity. As we have mentioned, the servant who does nothing with his pound is told that he should have placed it with a banker; and by this instruction the business of banking is clearly approved. In another of Christ's stories, a king is creditor of a servant to the large amount of 10,000

8. St. Matthew, 13:45, 46.

9. St. Matthew, 13:44.

10. St. Luke, 19:12-23 for the pounds, St. Matthew, 25:14-30 for the talents.

talents, and the servant is creditor of another servant for the trifling sum of a hundred pence. Neither debtor can pay; and the king cancels the great debt, but the servant beneficiary refuses to do likewise with the small sum owed to him. In this parable the king is praised for his generosity, and his action is likened to that of the kingdom of heaven, while the servant is condemned for his "harshness".¹¹ The action of the kingdom of heaven is like that of a considerate lender of money; and banking is thereby approved, although the use of it to injure a fellow-man is strongly disapproved. Christ has another illustration from the business of lending money, much like this. A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed 500 pence, the other 50. When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both.¹² The hero of this occasion is the man who lends money and is generous to the borrowers; and his action is likened to that of Christ himself in forgiving sins. Three times, therefore, Christ pronounced the private conduct of banking to be in accord with Christian principles; and this demonstration ought to be enough.

But if Christ's approval of business in principle is clear, his objection to dishonest practices in it is also clear. The servant mentioned above, who will not cancel his helpless fellow's debt, comes in for strong condemnation. Here also we may consider the tale of the unjust steward. This man cheated his master, was found out and was given notice. Before he left, he wrote down the debts which various persons owed his master, in the hope that they would lodge and board him after his discharge. His action is described as typical of the fraudulent sort of business, "for the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." There follows a discussion of friendship with the mammon of unrighteousness, and a conclusion "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." The meaning of mammon is not clear, but at any rate the steward's sharp practice is condemned.¹³ The well-known affair of the Temple also illustrates this aspect of Christ's teaching. He cast out the buyers and sellers, the money-changers and especially the dealers in doves, on the ground that they had made the Temple a den of thieves. There are here two notions; one, that the Temple ought not to be a place of merchandise at all; the other, that the traffic in it had been dishonest.¹⁴ Finally, we have the case of Zaccheus the repentant publican

11. St. Matthew, 18:23-35.

12. St. Luke, 7:41-42.

13. St. Luke, 16:1-13.

14. St. Matthew, 21:12, 13; St. John, 2:13-16, noticing only the condemnation of the principle of traffic in the temple.

or customs agent, as we should say. He had cheated some people in the course of his collections; and becoming converted, he undertook to make fourfold restitution to those whom he had defrauded and to give half of his goods to the poor. He thus confessed and atoned for his dishonesty in order to please Jesus, and succeeded, as Jesus said "This day is salvation come to this house."¹⁵ We may well conclude that Christ demanded probity and generosity in the conduct of business; and this requirement met, he had no thought of disapproval of business as such.

We may now enquire whether it is possible to discern his views about regulation of economic affairs; and we start with the problem of economic equality. A man had trouble with his brother over an inheritance, and asked Christ to speak to the brother and ask him to divide it. Christ positively refused, on the ground that he was no judge or divider.¹⁶ The equality or inequality of the brothers' shares was not his business. There were secular agencies for the settlement of such disputes, and he would leave them to their work. He would not even make a recommendation, for he could not turn aside from his mission to such worldly affairs without neglecting the work for which he had come to the earth. He had no interest in equality of bequests, and he did not care to regulate such economic matters. The parable of the vineyard deserves attention here. This man hired some laborers for the whole day, others in several sets for different parts of the day and paid them all at the rate agreed on for the first set, a penny a day. The earliest lot complained of the inequality of labor and reward, and were rebuked for their pains.¹⁷ The entire right of the owner to discriminate among his employees is emphasised. He has paid the current rate of wages, and is guilty of no exploiting or sweating; but once he has done this, he is not bound by the principle of equal pay for equal work, and insists on his right to vary the rate of reward, flouting trade union principles. This evidence is not massive, but it suffices to show that Christ cared little for the ideal of economic equality.

The same parable of the vineyard makes clear Christ's ideas of private property. "I will give unto this last even as unto thee; is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?" declares the owner to the complaining first set of laborers. "Is thine eye evil because I am good?"¹⁸ Here the principle of private

15. St. Luke, 19:1-9.

16. St. Luke, 12:13,14.

17. St. Matthew, 20:1-16.

18. St. Matthew, 20:14,15.

property is strikingly affirmed; a man may do what he will with his own after paying current rates of wages, and no trade union or other agency has any right to interfere with him. The story of the prodigal son also illustrates the point. When the father makes a feast for the returning scapegrace, the respectable elder son, who has never enjoyed such an honor, complains that the father is discriminating against him. The father replies in effect that this is none of the elder son's business, and that he will welcome the prodigal as he sees fit.¹⁹ Again, the owner of property may use it as he will, and may bestow any portion of it on whom he wishes, in utter disregard of the principle of equality. We need have no hesitation in concluding that Christ believed thoroughly in private property, as he did in trade and banking.

We come now to the problem of regulation of labor. As we have seen, the owner of the vineyard keeps this in his own hands and will not listen to the suggestions of the early sets of laborers; for he may do what he will with his own. Christ approves the practice, and likens it to that of the kingdom of heaven; which seems to show sufficiently well that he considered regulation of labor to be a private matter. Once he was asked to do some regulating himself. When he was visiting at the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany, Martha had much serving to do and her sister was sitting at the Lord's feet. Martha naturally thought herself deserted in her hour of need, and asked Christ to send Mary to give her a hand with the work. Christ refused, saying that Mary had chosen the better part.²⁰ He would not regulate labor even in the interest of fairness, for he considered such matters of no importance as compared with the kingdom of God which it was his duty to preach. He shrank from the regulation of economic life as he did from politics; both were none of his business. If one person bore an undue share of a certain labor, that too was none of Christ's business. Inequalities, at least where no personal hardships were inflicted, were quite tolerable in his eyes.

Of his attitude toward relief of the poor there is good evidence in the gospels. The converted Zaccheus gives half of his goods to the poor; the rich young man who seeks to follow Christ is exhorted to sell his property and give to the poor.²¹ The "little flock" of Luke 12; 32-33 are told to sell what they have and give alms; and money goes to the poor from the com-

19. St. Luke, 15:11-22.

20. St. Luke, 10:39-42.

21. St. Matthew, 19:16-22 for the rich young man.

mon bag of the disciples. Charity and assistance to the needy are certainly required of Christians. But they are not the only or the principal requirement. While Christ was at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, a woman came to him and used more than 300 pence worth of ointment on him. Some of the company objected, saying that the ointment ought to have been sold and the money given to the poor. Christ, however, had no word of reproof for this bit of luxury on the woman's part; he exonerated her, declaring that the poor were always available for help, but that he would not long be so.²² Charity was not to him the principal object on which money should be spent, nor were the poor the most important group in the world. The service to God came always first.

We may notice for a moment the expression "ye have the poor with you always." There was about this nothing mandatory; it was not a requirement of perpetual poverty for one class of the community. It was a mere statement of fact. But by making it in so casual a fashion, Christ implied that it was not his business or that of his disciples as Christians to expel Dame Poverty from the land. Such activity, however laudable in itself, was out of their sphere. Had Christ believed in the so-called social gospel, he would not have taken poverty so much for granted; he would have laid it down that a Christian's duty is to distribute more of the good things of the world among the depressed classes. His failure to do so reinforces our impression that he resolutely kept his hands off any regulation of economic life. Not that he would necessarily oppose such regulation; but it was none of his business. We are now in a fair way to state our conclusions; that Christ approved of trade, banking and private property in principle, that his method of relief to the poor was direct aid, that he refused to interfere with the working of the economic system, the courts for inheritance disputes or the regulation of labor. In a word, he had few of the symptoms of the Socialist.

We may now try to define his attitude to the rich. Some of these were naturally attracted to him, and among them a young man who had lived an exemplary life but felt dissatisfied spiritually. Jesus told him to go and sell what he had and give to the poor, then come and follow him, i.e., join his band. This was too much of a test for the young man, who went away sorrowful,

²² St. Mark, 14:3-9 and St. Matthew 26:6-13 agree about this story of the ointment. In St. John, 12:1-8 a similar occurrence is placed in the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Mary is the heroine, Judas the grumbler, and the price of the ointment is 300 pence. Whether this is the same event, remembered in different fashion by different authors, is of no importance for our purpose.

for he had great possessions. The event gave rise to a discussion among the disciples in which Christ took a leading part. "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God" he said. The disciples were astonished, for they had never known him as an enemy of the rich, and he saw that he had not made his meaning clear. He corrected himself by saying "How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God"; and he continued with the well-known statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.²³ There has been much learned discussion about the eye of a needle, but the meaning of the sentence is clear, that rich men find the road to heaven steep and hard. Once Christ used the man who built up and trusted in his riches as an example of the fool. "This night shall thy soul be required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?" Again he said "Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"; and shortly after, "Woe unto you that are rich, for you have received your consolation." But at this time he was talking of the persecutions and other difficulties to come after his death, and making a prediction for a definite period; he was not calling woe on the rich of all times and places.²⁴ The tale of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus may be cited here; the rich man goes to hell, while the poor one goes to heaven.²⁵ Certainly Christ thought the rich much less promising material for the kingdom of heaven than the poor, and he looked with suspicion on the possession of riches as likely to divert attention from the service of God. It was the effect of riches on their possessor that drew his concern, and not at all their effect on the distribution of goods among the inhabitants of the world. It was not the inequality of properties that troubled him, but the condition of the owners' souls. His aspersions on riches therefore have quite a different motive from those made by the Socialists. They are interested in material things, he in spiritual things. After disposing of the man who wanted a redivision of his father's property, he drew the moral "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth."²⁶ Again he adopts a frigid attitude toward riches; and again because they encourage covetousness and not because they produce economic inequality.

23. St. Matthew, 19:16-22, St. Mark, 10:23-27.

24. St. Luke, 12:29 for the rich fool, 6:20-24 for the blessing on the poor and the woe on the rich.

25. St. Luke, 16:19-31 for Lazarus and the rich man.

26. St. Luke, 12:15.

It may be objected that there is a discrepancy between this chilliness toward riches and the approval of business which we have seen in many parables. Most business men of course do not become wealthy, and the small business man has nothing to fear in Christ's warnings; for was he not himself once in the business of carpentry? The highly successful business man becomes rich and then may need to watch his step, according to Christ's teachings. The discrepancy, however, is no more than a difference of stress. When Christ was thinking primarily of economic activities, he approved of wealth-getting; when he was thinking first of the soul, he issued warnings about its possible effect on the getter. But he did not condemn the getting in itself.

He was never weary of preaching the simple life to the disciples. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth", he says in the sermon on the mount, "but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." They were to take no thought for food or clothing, for God would take care of them as he did of the birds and the lilies. They were to sell what they had and give alms and lay up for themselves treasures in heaven.²⁷ The advice to the rich young man which we have cited is of this order; he is to sell all his property if he wishes to be perfect, and follow Christ as the disciples did.²⁸ But these instructions were not general; they were for a band of missionaries who would spend their lives preaching and could not well be encumbered with property. They were not for the rank and file Christian who must pursue a calling and make a living, incidentally furnishing support to the missionaries. And it is the rank and file Christian in whom we are most interested.

The question now arises whether it is a sin for this rank and file Christian to acquire more worldly goods than his neighbor. We recur to the parable of the treasure in the field and the acquisition of wealth thereby, which is compared to the gaining of the kingdom of heaven. Had Christ thought wealth sinful in itself, he would not have made such a comparison. We may return also to the story of the wealthy man with a good crop who planned to build larger barns and said "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry." But God required his soul of him that evening, and called him a fool. "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself" declared Christ, "and is not rich toward God."²⁹ The

27. St. Matthew, 6:19-20 and 23-24; St. Luke, 12:33.

28. St. Matthew, 19:21.

29. St. Matthew, 13:24; St. Luke, 12:19-21.

laying up of treasure is not condemned in itself, but for the possibility or likelihood that it draws one off from God. Last, we may remember that Christ had a few rich men devoted to him, Joseph of Arimathea,²⁰ Zaccheus the publican and, presumably, Nicodemus. He did not require them to strip themselves of their wealth; he left it to themselves to determine how much of their property they would devote to charity or other altruistic purposes. Riches and their acquisition then are subject to caution; they are hindrances to participation in the kingdom of heaven, but are not positive disqualifications for it. They are not in themselves matters for Christian condemnation; it is no sin in itself to be rich. Christ permits riches and luxuries, if these are duly subordinated to the requirements of the kingdom of God.

What then would be Christ's attitude to present-day problems of unemployment and to the suggested remedies of the Socialists? Certainly he would approve our system of relief in its many phases, in principle at any rate. But what would he say of the so-called planning of economic life for a more abundant and equal distribution of goods? He would probably not go into the question whether such planning would really produce the effects which are confidently attributed to it. He would say that the relation of government to industry was not his business, and he would declare neither for nor against a government which chose to plan economic life. But to the Socialist who views the good life as the possession and increase of material things, he would certainly be cold. The so-called social gospel, which seeks to identify his teachings with the multiplication of worldly goods, would seem to him to be off the track. For his concern was with the minimum requirements of the body and the maximum requirements of the soul. He would have as little to do as he could with government and economic affairs, and as much as he could with the things of the spirit. He would not pronounce Socialism unchristian; he would probably treat it as he did riches, permitting it with reservations and cautions, and displaying little enthusiasm for it. It takes no great stretch of the imagination to hear him saying "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a Socialist to understand and enter into the kingdom of God."

20. St. Matthew, 27:57 for Joseph of Arimathea.