
The Church and the Workingman

by Eugene V. Debs

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A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

— *Proverbs*.¹

In the February [1889] number of *The Forum*, Rev. C.M. Morse has a paper captioned, "The Church and the Workingman." The paper contains many words fitly spoken and bravely spoken. The Rev. Mr. Morse, (may his tribe increase) like Abou Ben Adhem, loves his fellow man, and therefore loves God.² Those who do not love their fellow man, but profess to love God are the most despicable hypocrites that the devil ever entertained with distinguished consideration.

Mr. Morse is one of the "cloth that he has been "called" to preach, will be admitted by those who read his courageous words, without debate. He talks as if his lips have been " touched with live coals from off the altar." "Fifty years ago," says Mr. Morse, "aristocratic pretensions were looked upon as vagaries and treated with contempt. In the churches, people felt nothing of the chill of caste." This is all changed. Everywhere there is "rivalry in the erection of splendid edifices." "The poverty of the workingman is accentuated by comparison with the richness of the sanctuary." "The chief seats are lined with purple and fine linen." The church is full of pomp, pride and arrogance. " With the vast aggregation of wealth in the possession of the few and the increasing pressure of poverty in the homes of the many, the time is at hand," says Mr. Morse, "when there will exist between classes gulfs as impassible as between Dives and Lazarus."³ According

¹ *Proverbs*, chapter 25, verse 11.

² Reference is to the poem "Abou Ben Adhem and the Angel" (1838), by **Leigh Hunt** (1784-1859).

³ An allusion to the parable of the Lazarus the beggar and the rich man, attributed to Jesus and told in *Luke*, chapter 16, verses 19-31.

to Rev. Mr. Morse's theory, the church, whose mission it is to bring Dives and Lazarus into sympathetic alliance, exerts an influence to deepen and broaden the gulf of separation. "Intensifying social struggles," says Mr. Morse, "are working a transformation in the character of the church, as is manifest from the new terminology coming into general use, such as 'star preachers,' 'first-class churches,' 'wealthy congregations,' and 'our poor charges.' The adverse of this is found in the expressions of the workingmen: 'We can't dress well enough to go to church;' 'your leading members don't notice us on the street;' 'your preachers run after the rich;' 'the preachers side against us in the matter of strikes.'" Evidently Rev. Mr. Morse knows what he is talking about. He sees clearly and speaks honestly. The church is aristocratic. With more pride than piety the influence of the church, is to repel, not only workingmen, but all men who abhor shams. "The great human heart of the people," says Mr. Morse, "comprehends in some measure the fact that Christianity is not a cement to hold a rich veneer to a body of inferior materials, but a furnace to fuse all elements into one homogeneous mass."

But the church is not a furnace, it does not fuse; it is more like a refrigerator, it freezes. The "star preacher" is like the "star actor." The "first class church" from a religious point of view, is a first-class fraud. "Under present conditions," says Mr. Morse, "it is sheer folly to talk about the rich and the poor meeting together in the house of God, the poor decline the invitation." Why? Because the poor discover that the rich Christians do not regard religion as a pledge of equality in the church nor "outside of the church." Mr. Morse says "the two great classes of our population, capitalists and workingmen, are separated by an irreconcilable antagonism in assault and defense of a system which, in the thought of the masses, is founded on injustice and denounced by God's word." The church arrays itself on the side of the capitalist. "The churches," says Mr. Morse, "maintain, at least by implication, that the great fortunes of the day are the fruit of legitimate industrial enterprise, and belong to their possessors as against the world," and that "poverty is due to laziness and inefficiency, waste, mismanagement, extravagance, injurious indulgence, and absence of a definite and resolute purpose to escape from poverty."

Admitting that Mr. Morse states the facts in the case, what inducement does the church hold out for workingmen to look upon it with favor? It is in alliance with those who oppress them. In the sanctuary (?) which in numerous cases are merely clubhouses, surrounded

by every luxury wealth can procure — with a “star preacher” paid a bank president’s salary — the monstrous iniquities practiced by the rich to grow richer and to make the poor poorer, receive no rebuke from the church. On the contrary, the church accounts for the wrongs by repeating the phrase, “the will of God.” But, says Mr. Morse: “The workingman does not believe it. Looking around upon the apparent disorder he replies, “God would have done a better job.” Says Mr. Morse, “Christ teaches the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; why does His doctrine show so little income?” “To all these inquiries there is but one answer, the providence of God.” “Providence, then,” asserts the workingman has been overlooked, “and he turns to his labor organization for relief and sympathy.” “In all his difficulties, and to all his better pleadings, the church returns decrepit generalities, and is earnest and definite only in defense of vested rights when threatened by labor agitation.”

It is well for society that occasionally a man like Rev. C.M. Morse is found who has the courage to point out the mistakes of the church, and who has the capacity to comprehend the character, capabilities and services of workingmen. Society is never more deeply wronged than when injustice is done any one of its component parts, and though it should be asserted that the blow is aimed at the foot rather than at the head of the body social, the injury inflicted may not prove the less fatal, society has a right to appeal to the press, to the courts and to the church for justice in all matters affecting its welfare. If the influence of these acknowledged factors, in the progress of enlightenment become debauched, if, by any means whatever they are deflected from the shining pathways of truth, probity and high endeavor for the good of all, and are made to pander to base designs of cliques, society feels the wrong and realizes that there is treason in her camp and that calamities are to come. It may be said in extenuation for the press and the courts, that they are simply human, but the church, with its divine commission, the church with robed priests and sacred symbols, the church pleading its soul-saving mission in the earth, the church with its altars and shrines — the church, claiming the Eternal God as its founder and Christ Jesus, the son of God, as its head; the church with its sermons, prayers and communions; if the church goes wrong who is to set it right? The Rev. Mr. Morse does not hesitate to say the church has gone wrong. It has planted itself on the side of the rich, and in opposition to the poor— and as a result, workingmen turn away from the church, from its pride and pomp,

and seek for religious teaching elsewhere, turn to their "labor organizations for relief and sympathy."

"The workingman," says Rev. Mr. Morse, "believes that in the estimation of the church, gold, stocks, and bonds must be protected, while bodies, hearts and homes are left at the mercy of erratic economic principles. And when we remember Christ's example and words, can we censure the workingman for the stand he has taken?" The idea that "star preachers" of "first-class churches" and "wealthy congregations" can be of any religious advantage to men, who say, "such preachers run after the rich," is too preposterous to be entertained for an instant. They do not believe it. There are to be no second-class seats in God's house, no second-class religious prescriptions to cure the sins of workingmen, while the members of "wealthy congregations" are to have their pills sugar-coated. The moment the church insults Jehovah by being a "respector of persons," its glory departs. The church edifice may be built of diamonds — pulpits may be overlaid with gold. The theological seminary may turn out "star preachers" whose eloquent periods may ring like thunder peals— and the rich and the proud, the exclusive, may go in and worship (?) but under their influence hollow-heartedness will increase, rottenness and corruption will prevail in high places, and the church will stand forth as a whitened sepulcher. The Rev. Mr. Morse thinks that a "crisis has come — and that the church must continue to support the present order of things," or "champion the cause of the poor and oppressed." But workingmen are not going to wait to see what the church will do. They are able to take care of themselves, religiously and pecuniarily. If they want a preacher they can call a fisherman and the master will commission him.

The real significance of the paper of Rev. C.M. Morse is found in the fact that there are men in the church who have courage, and who dare tell the church that in its treatment of workingmen, its course is neither honorable nor politic. Rev. Mr. Morse is clearly of the opinion that the churches need reforming, as at present managed they are accomplishing little good.

In view of all the facts, workingmen must have their own press — and this they have, and the number of papers devoted to their interests is increasing. There is to be no miraculous intervention in their behalf. With the ballot, and an intelligent comprehension of its power, the laws of the land, are in the near future to map out vivid lines by which courts are to be guided. The church will be the last to

swing into line, but should it maintain its present attitude, as pointed out by Mr. Morse, it will be powerless to arrest the onward and upward march of workingmen. The age in which we live is iconoclastic. Images and shams must go. The votaries of jugglery are decreasing in number and power. If the churches are to fake a position in the van of the advancing armies of progress, they must read and remember such wholesome advice as is found in the paper by Rev. C.M. Morse published in the February *Forum*.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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