THE LARGER SOCIAL SERVICE OF THE CHURCH

Modern society is under conviction of sin. True, this conviction is not quite the same as that under which olden-time evangelists sought to bring their hearers. We have not had forced upon us the horrors of hell and our desert of eternal punishment. But we are none the less suffering the pangs of conscience.

Who is responsible for overworked mothers, for starved babies, for children who work that capital may declare dividends, for shop girls burned alive for lack of fire escapes, for politicians who are grafters, for corporations that defy law, for the horrors of the white slave traffic, for fathers and mothers who prefer “joy rides” to the care of children?

Once we were indifferent to such questions. We said misery is the outgrowth of social evolution and the accompaniment of prosperity. Such replies no longer leave us easy-minded. Even those who still amuse their consciences with old excuses masquerading in scientific vocabularies, are growing morally discontented. Our modern world may not fear hell; but it does fear the outcomes of injustice, mendacity, and lust.

Our sense of responsibility is growing individual. We are not quite so ready as we once were to slip over upon society the responsibility for social sin. We get decreasing satisfaction from trying to think of ourselves as peripatetic laboratories emerging from the social process and dominated by the sex instinct. Somehow we are coming to feel that what is nobody’s fault is our own fault.

The very bitterness of our disillusioning is become our salvation. To face moral evil is to call upon God for help. Conviction of sin has always been the first stage of a revival of religion.
We are already in the midst of such a revival. And it is something more than a new sense of duty. It is a turning to the God of duty.

As we try to work for Him we see the hopelessness of our efforts unless He works for us.

As Jesus Christ touches men's consciences, the Father of Jesus Christ must give them forgiveness.

This depth of moral unrest, this Nathan-like appeal we each one of us make to ourselves as we see the injustice and the cruelty of what we call civilization, this new turning to God all force the church to take itself seriously as an institution of a religion that shall inspire social love and sacrifice.

That is the larger social service the church alone can render.

However much our churches can minister to the communities' need of wholesome picture shows, libraries, boys' clubs, basket-ball teams, and men's banquets, they will commit suicide if they do not help society out from its conviction of sin into a sense of brotherhood through fellowship with God.

Social service is not altruistic restlessness. It is the wisely directed ministry of souls who believe in something better than the heroism of a forlorn hope. It is religion at work. We do not want our churches "hustling" miscellaneous reforms. We do not want them ethical orphan asylums where people are amused to keep them out of mischief. We want them spiritual homes in which souls are born into spiritual life and taught the social meaning of regeneration.

Social evolution is a splendid term, but it leaves the heart empty. If the Holy Ghost is really convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment, a church which tries to introduce religion surreptitiously between stereopticon slides is a sorry spectacle. But a church filled with a contagious faith in the God of things as they are becoming, that seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, that stirs men to moral discontent in order that they may be brought into sacrificial service through fellowship with their crucified Lord, that bases the demand for human fraternity upon the experience of divine sonship; such a church is the veritable servant of the living God.